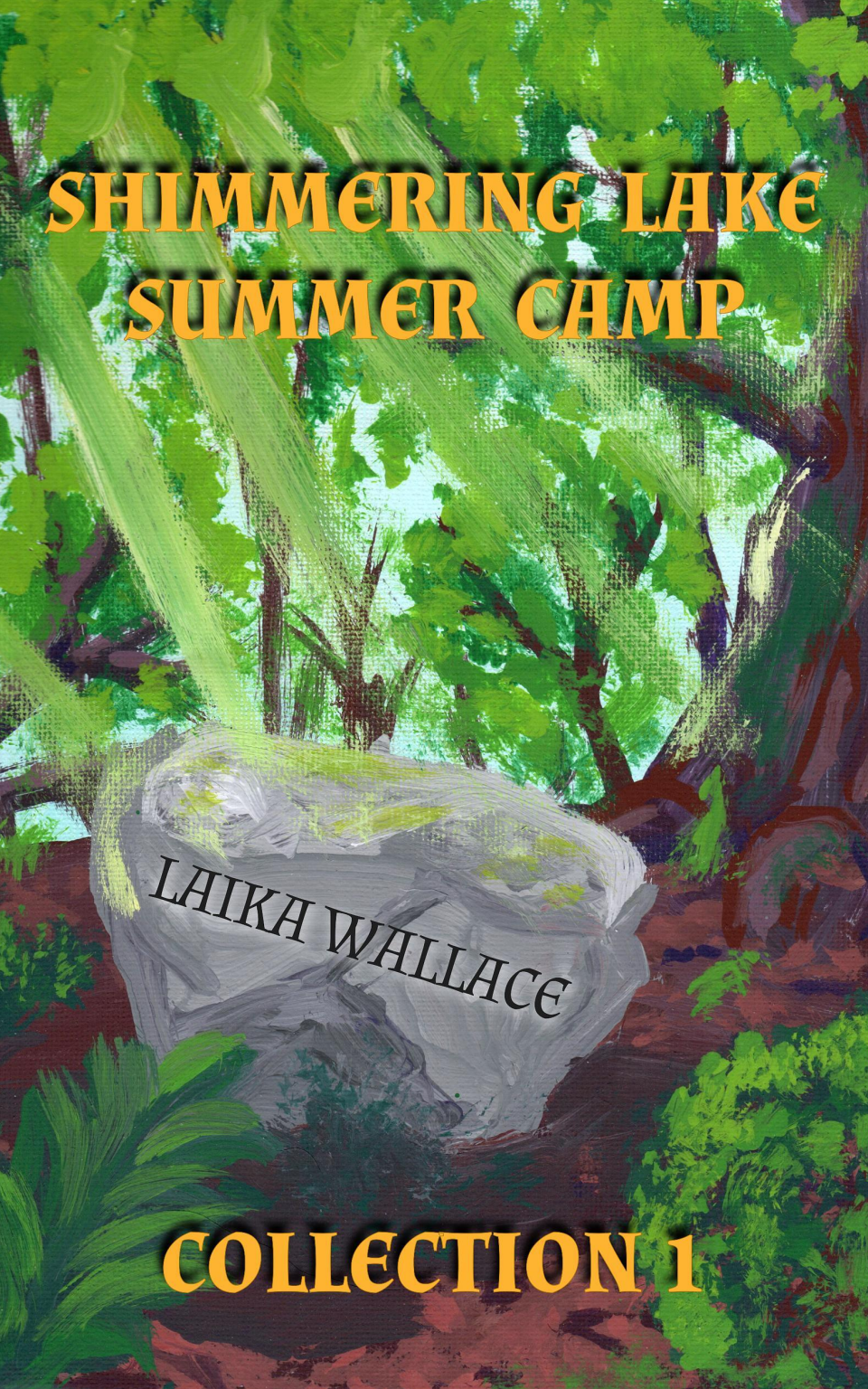
SHIMMERING LAKE
SUMMER CAMP
LAIKA WALLACE
COLLECTION 1

LAIKA WALLACE

Shimmering Lake Summer Camp Collection 1

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For C, E, and L.

Contents

Also in this series...	iii
Frogcruncher Chase	1
The Bite	6
Shebal's Surprise	27
Grandma's Stories	32
Big News	37
Pride	45
Believe In You	58
Camper Group Chat	67
The Sullen Swamp	73
Puppy Playdate	88
Isolation	95
The Snow Ball	106
Night Swim	122
Halloween, 2020	133
To Be Yours	143
Happiness	147
A Warm Meal	157
Escaping The Noise	162
Monstr	190
Ripley's Road Trip	200
Dead End Gas Station	215
Don't Forget To Call	219
Below The Surface	225

Big Surprises 262
The End 272
New Beginnings 288
About the Author 324

Also in this series…

1. Whisper in the Woods: Shimmering Lake Summer Camp Book One
2. Love Like This
3. Lured to the Lake: Shimmering Lake Summer Camp Book Two
4. Shimmering Lake Summer Camp Collection 1

Frogcruncher Chase

Ripley first caught sight of it while he was playing with his Littlest Pet Shops in his room, lining them up on his windowsill to look out with him to watch the trees swaying in the wind. It was particularly windy out, due to the passing storm, and he liked to watch the fluffy green trees lose their leaves. He knew the storm wouldn't hit here, not any more than the little rain that had already fallen— bad weather hardly ever hit Beacon Hill— but he was so afraid of lightning, he still wouldn't go outside.

But then he saw it. A shadow, yes, but still in the shape he remembered from last time. Like a cat, but a little bigger, with a long, tufted tail and tiny horns between triangular ears. Without even touching his field handbook, he knew exactly what he was looking at: a frogcruncher!

In his excitement, he swept all his toys to the floor and had to hastily pick them up to replace them on the windowsill. His hands shook as he worked, bouncing in place. He had to be so fast or it'd get away again! There was no way he'd let it go this time. Just one photo, one clear look for a sketch— that's all he wanted. And he would get it!

Satisfied with his placement of his Littlest Pet Shops, he dashed to his closet on the other side of the room and pulled

out a pair of rain pants. He scrambled into them, hopping on one leg and bumping into his toy chest, banging his knee. It didn't slow him down. He thundered down the stairs, grabbing the bannister post at the bottom and swinging around to speed down the hall and into the kitchen.

"Dad! Mom," he called, but thumped to a stop in the doorway, his face falling and his arms flopping down.

Mom wasn't there. She wouldn't be there again, probably ever… His parents were divorced now. She had her own place. It had been two years, and he'd mostly gotten used to the change— she had a girlfriend now who was really nice to him, and he got to stay with them every other week, so it wasn't all that bad— but he'd really wanted her to be here for when he finally catches the frogcruncher. She'd been there when he saw it the first time, and she'd pointed out the trail of, well, crunched frogs leading to the sewer grate where it had vanished. She'd been the one to name it.

She had to see it…

He balled his fists in determination. She did have to see it. So he had to get that photo.

"Dad!" he called again as his dad stepped around the kitchen wall to stand in the doorway, holding a mixing bowl and wearing an apron.

"You don't have to shout, kiddo, I'm right here," he said, laughing. He put the mixing bowl on the counter and leaned down to ruffle his son's short, fuzzy afro. "What's up, little man?"

"I need to borrow your camera right now!" he said, jumping up and down. "I saw the frogcruncher from my window and I need to get a photo for Mom because she isn't here and she named it and everything and I need to put it in my book!"

"Woah, woah, slow down," his dad chuckled. "You need the Coolpix?"

Ripley nodded furiously, lips pressed into a line.

"Okay, permission granted. You know where it is."

Ripley yelled a thank you and bolted to the living room. He climbed onto the arm of the couch to reach the camera where it was kept on the bookshelf by the big front window. Hopping down with the little digital camera hanging around his neck, he scrambled into his yellow raincoat, but opted for shoes so his feet wouldn't get sore, and so he'd be able to keep up with the animal.

And keep up he'd need to! As soon as he reached the spot he'd seen it in, sitting and grooming, the creature took off in a streak of dark brown. He went after it, huffing as he raced down the sidewalk, passing the tree behind his house, tearing across lawns and destroying flowerbeds. The dark blur blended into every growing shadow it passed through. He skidded to a stop at the corner, nearly slipping in a puddle. He had to wave his arms frantically to regain his balance, the camera banging against his chest.

It was getting away! He looked this way and that, but couldn't see it anymore. Where could it have gone?

Wait, there! It was hiding behind a birdbath on a neighbor's lawn. Ripley gave a little hop in excitement, fumbling to bring the camera to his face. He watched, trembling with the intensity of needing to stay still, as the dark, catlike shape crept forward, low to the ground, and pounced on a leaf! He snapped a photo with a squeal, the flash scaring it away, but that didn't matter. He'd captured it on camera!

Scampering back home, he yelled for his dad the second he'd opened the door. In a rush, he begged for him to put the photo

on his computer right now so he could show his mom because he'd finally gotten a photo and it couldn't wait because it was so important!

His dad chuckled from the kitchen and said, "Hold up, buddy, we've got pancakes to eat first."

Ripley gasped. "Breakfast for dinner?"

"You got it. Pancakes, bacon, eggs sunny side up, fruit salad…"

"And orange juice?"

"Of course."

Ripley heaved a dramatic sigh. "Okay, but you gotta at least look at the picture first."

As Ripley kicked his shoes off and shrugged out of his raincoat, his dad came over and lifted the camera off over his head. Anxiously, Ripley fiddled with the the zippers on the pockets of his pants. His dad didn't jump for joy like he'd expected him to…

"Buddy, I don't wanna crush your hopes, but… That's our neighbor's cat."

"What!" He reached up to take the camera and see for himself. It was true! Tears welled up in his eyes and he began to shake. "There's no way… I was right behind it! It must have given me the slip."

His dad knelt down and patted his shoulder, saying, "Hey, you did your best. And maybe Mom will be able to help you look for it when she comes to pick you up tomorrow."

Wiping tears from his cheeks, he nodded and said in a small, trembly voice, "Yeah, maybe."

"Time for pancakes?"

He nodded again, more firmly this time. "Time for pancakes." With a final look out the window beside the door, he set his mouth in a determined line and whispered, "I'll get you next

time, frogcruncher…"

The Bite

I stared out the window of my classroom, chewing the end of my pencil. I had carved out the eraser with my thumbnail because it tasted funny, and tore off the metal because Carter said if I bit metal I'd electrocute myself. It completes the circuit, he said. I didn't really believe him because he tried to stab me with scissors last week, but it was scary to think of what would happen if he was right.

The bell rang, making me jump.

"Okay, we'll pick back up tomorrow afternoon," Miss Crosby said, closing her math book.

I looked down at my sheet. None of the questions were answered. I shoved it into my desk before she could walk over and see. Then I followed everybody else into the hallway.

We all went to our hangers first while Miss Crosby watched. I picked up my bag and raincoat. Somebody had thrown them on the ground again. It was probably Carter. I kept my head down and inside my hood as I hurried to the doors. He was following me, but I tried not to pay attention. I slipped between a group of older kids who were chatting so I could push open the heavy doors and hurry outside. It was only drizzling now, but I still wanted to get home as fast as I could. Especially with Carter being creepy.

I ran down the path, moving out of the way of kids getting picked up by their parents, looking for their vans, and walking to the buses that were parked beside the school. Some of the oldest kids, grade eights, were waiting down by the bus stop at the other side of the parking lot. That's where I saw Carter's older brother, Andrew, with a bunch of Carter's friends.

He smiled and waved at me.

"Um," I yelped, hurrying up to pass him, "hi Andrew."

Carter's friends laughed a bit, but I heard him telling them to stop. Then I heard him ask Carter where he was going in such a hurry.

I let out a sigh of relief and dashed around the corner, looking both ways before crossing Sturbridge. That's where Carter's house is. It's a big house way at the end. Andrew waits for the bus with his friends every day, though. I used to think Andrew was scary, but he's actually nice. He was my storytime buddy when I was in kindergarten, and now he helps me bring milk cartons to classrooms at lunch. I'm the youngest kid who does it, but I like it. I get the milks that would go to kids who aren't at school.

As I passed the big, empty field between the big houses on Sturbridge and the smaller houses on the next street, I looked over my shoulder to see that Carter wasn't with his brother anymore. My stomach did a flip. Where was he? I looked around, trying not to look suspicious, but my gut told me to run home instead.

I whirled around, running as fast as I could. It started to rain harder and I didn't really know where I was, so I turned up the first street I came to. Hearing Carter's shoes hitting the pavement behind me, I ran faster, but I had to stop in the parking lot at the end of the street. It was a dead end. I only

had time to turn around before Carter hit me in the chest with both fists.

I stumbled backwards, slipping on a sewer grate and falling on my back. I yelled in pain and he lifted his leg to stomp on me. I forced myself up, grabbing his foot and pushing back as hard as I could. He shouted as he fell over and I scrambled to my feet, scraping my elbow even through my coat. Then I found a path and ran down it. I didn't know where I was going, but it was better than sticking around.

The path brought me past a little park with boxes of plants and benches, but it also brought me to some backyard fences. I looked over my shoulder and saw Carter starting to come down the path, so I ran quickly between two houses. I was in another parking lot now. I looked around, confused. But wait, there was the big road I walked up to get home. I ran towards it, and when I was back on the sidewalk, I saw three big trees. I ducked behind two of them that were close together, curling up into a ball. I hoped my raincoat didn't give me away.

I heard Carter stomping around in the grass near me. He picked up a stick and hit it against the other tree, but he didn't say anything. He stayed for forever, looking around, but he didn't find me. Finally, he threw the stick down and stomped back towards his house.

I peeked out from between the trees, watching him walk up the sidewalk for as long as I could. Then I decided it was safe and got up, brushed myself off a bit, and started walking home again.

I was all dirty from hiding by the trees and falling down. Nothing was ripped or broken, but I knew Mommy would get so mad at me for getting dirty.

I turned onto the other big road that went to my house. I

walked slowly past my neighbor's huge hedge fence. I liked it a lot, but Mommy said it only brought noisy birds and squirrels into our backyard. We didn't have much in our backyard, even though it was big and long. Mostly Pa used it to barbecue in the summer and make forts with me in the winter. Trace joined too, since he turned old enough. He was four years old now and very noisy.

There was no sidewalk on my street, but we were only the second house so I didn't feel very scared walking on the edge of the road. I walked up the driveway to the door and knocked.

"Morgan's home!" Trace yelled from the living room. I heard him running to get me, but he couldn't open the door himself. Pa followed him and let me in.

"Are you alright, little buddy? You look like you've had fun," Pa said with a laugh.

I frowned as I took off my backpack and coat. "I'm okay."

He asked me how my day was and if I needed help with homework.

I said I didn't have any and tried to wipe off the dirt from my jeans.

"Hey, it's okay," he said, taking my hand. "Let's get those into the washing machine."

"It's not the weekend yet," I protested. "Mommy—"

"It's okay. Mommy's not home."

"I won't tell!" Trace yelled as he dug through my backpack. He grabbed my lunch box and ran to the kitchen with it.

"Thanks, Trace," I called after him. He liked to clean out my lunch box. He loved being involved.

Pa followed him right away, because he couldn't reach the sink on his own. "Put your clothes in my laundry basket, okay bud?"

"Okay!" I said. I went upstairs to my bedroom and changed into pajamas. Downstairs, I heard my brother laughing as he played with the sink water and dish soap. I carried my dirty clothes to Mommy and Pa's room at the end of the hall. Then I dropped my clothes into Pa's laundry basket and went downstairs again. Pa passed me, going upstairs to get the clothes, so I went to see Trace. He was jumping on his toes in front of the fridge.

"What are you doing?" I asked, looking up where he was looking.

"Cookie jar," he begged.

"No," I said.

"Cookie jar?" He wiggled and smiled, pressing his soapy hands together.

"No! And wash your hands off," I said.

He squealed. "Wash them off? No! I like my hands on!" He turned and tried to run past me, but I scooped him up and swung him over my shoulder. He screamed in delight, but he was kicking his legs, and it was hard to hold him. I plopped him down on the counter and turned on the water so he could rinse his hands.

"There you go, you did it." I ruffled his hair.

"Nuh-uh," he said cheekily. "They're still on."

Pa came in with the laundry basket. "Can you get the basement door for me, Morgan?"

I put Trace back on the ground and opened the door for Pa. He went downstairs and I made sure Trace didn't follow him. He would probably fall down the stairs and hurt himself. These stairs weren't carpeted, and they sagged in the middle. But Trace didn't want to go downstairs anyway. He ran into the living room, so I chased him, bent over and wiggling my

fingers at him like I was going to tickle him. He ran around the coffee table and jumped up on the couch, giggling and shouting whenever I got close. I laughed with him. I liked to play with him like this, but we couldn't do it when Mommy was home. She was always so serious.

Pa came into the living room. "Oh, is the tickle monster here?"

I laughed and pulled a monstrous face as I pounced on Trace. I tickled him and he rolled around on the couch, laughing his head off.

"Okay, Morgan, you should let him go," Pa said after a couple minutes. "I want to hose down your raincoat before Mommy gets home."

"Oh yuck," Trace said, squirming away from me to sit on the couch properly.

"I know you don't like the hose," Pa said, "but you should come sit on the patio with Morgan. I don't want you in the house alone."

He reluctantly followed us to the back door after I got my coat. Pa opened the screen door and then the glass door and we walked out onto the patio. Trace went to play with some rocks while Pa got the hose. I put my coat on the ground, spread out, and he washed it down. The water made little rivers between the patio stones, running into the grass. I crouched down and watched it. The muck and twigs from my coat were being pulled along by the water, like debris in a flood.

When he was done, he put the hose away and brought my little brother inside. I hung my coat up to dry over top of the barbecue. I sat outside for a long time, watching the water until it was just the same as the rest of the water on the ground. When I went inside, Mommy was home.

"What were you doing out there? Catching a cold, no doubt.

You're not even wearing a coat," she scolded me as she put her purse on the table. "What's for dinner?"

"I want chicken nuggets!" Trace said, bouncing on the couch.

"Don't jump on the couch, Trace."

I slid along the floor in silent socked feet until I got to the stairs. I listened to my parents talk about what they wanted to make for dinner, then I went upstairs. I didn't really feel like eating. If it was chicken nuggets, which I wanted too, Mommy would complain about us eating so much junk food. If it was vegetables and rice like Mommy said to make, she would complain about how we never eat healthy. It didn't make sense to me how she could be upset about the same thing no matter if we did what she wanted. Seeing her upset the whole time made it hard for me to eat, even if I liked the food.

Sitting down on my floor to look at my stack of DVDs, I wondered if that's what Mommy wanted. She said I was too fat anyway. Maybe if I didn't eat, I wouldn't be so fat.

I frowned. I shook my head to make the thoughts go away, then chose a movie to watch and put it in my portable DVD player.

* * *

At lunch on Friday, I carried milk crates full of small milk cartons up and down the halls. Andrew wasn't here today, so it was just me and Jamilla. She was a year older than me and she was pretty. She had dark hair in two little buns and she had the prettiest, happiest smile. She painted her nails all sorts of colors and liked to dance. We were in the same class last year, when it was a split class, but she didn't talk to me. She didn't talk to me much now either, but I wanted to talk to her.

I coughed, adjusting how I held the milk crate. "Um," I said, feeling my face get slowly hotter, "hi Jamilla."

"Hi," she said, looking over at me with a confused face.

"I like your shoes." I swallowed, but the spit went down the wrong way and made me have a coughing fit. I didn't want to drop the milks, so I struggled to carry it and not spit all over them as I coughed with my mouth closed.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I nodded, still coughing.

We passed the water fountain, where Carter was getting a drink. He was talking with some girls. When he saw me, he said something I didn't hear and laughed at me. The girls giggled too.

"Don't laugh at Morgan," Jamilla said seriously. "It's not funny."

He flipped her off.

My face was red from being unable to breathe in the coughing fit, but embarrassment and anger turned it an even brighter shade. I managed to croak, "Hey, don't be mean to her!"

"Ooh," said one of the girls teasingly. "Somebody has a crush on Jamilla."

She rolled her eyes and we kept walking. "Ignore them. Carter and his friends are just attention seekers," she said as we came up to a classroom. She knocked on the door and cheerily announced that the milk was here.

I breathed slowly and calmly to recover from coughing so much as everyone came to get their milk. Jamilla was right, I decided. Carter was just an attention seeker.

At the end of the day, I went right home. Pa let me in and told me to keep quiet because Trace was napping.

"Now?" I asked, confused. "He never naps when I come

home."

"He's got a bit of a cold, I think."

I was worried. "Really? Will he be okay?"

Pa ruffled my hair and told me he'd be fine.

My tummy felt funny as I asked if it was okay if I still went out to play.

"Of course, don't worry about it, okay? Trace is fine. I gave him some medicine and chicken noodle soup. He'll be fine in the morning."

"Was it the really yucky stuff?" I asked. "The medicine?"

Pa smiled. "You know it."

I nodded firmly. "That means it'll work."

He laughed a bit but I wasn't trying to be funny. He gave me a pat on the back and told me to have fun. I smiled, hugged him quickly, and ran out the door.

I turned down the street and waited at the crosswalk before crossing the big road that brought me to school. Then I went into the parking lot of the houses there. It was a big parking lot with lots of grassy islands that had some trees. I tried to only walk on the grass so I didn't get in the way of any cars, even though there weren't many. I ran to the other end of the parking lot where there was a path that took me between a row of trees. Stumbling down into the ditch on the other side, I was careful not to fall before climbing up the slope. Around me, there was lots of grass and small, young trees planted far apart from each other. Past that, there were more houses.

The small path I was on went up to a bigger path, which I turned down. There were streetlights along this big path. I walked for a while until the path split in two. I turned left, towards a play structure. Jogging up to it, I ended up slowing down after I saw there were other kids playing and some parents

sitting on the benches. One of the kids stopped at the top of the slide and looked at me. I got nervous and hurried away.

A few minutes later, I reached another fork in the path. I took the smaller path now. It went between two houses. As I passed the backyards, I heard kids laughing and playing and a dog barking. There was a big splash and everybody sounded happy. I frowned and sped up.

When I got to the road, I walked carefully on the curb. There were no sidewalks here either, but there wasn't a lot of traffic so I didn't feel very scared. I walked for a bit until I crossed a street, then I passed another house before getting to the street I wanted to be on. It was a big street, connected to the one I took to school. I could have just walked up to it that way, but I liked going through the park, even if I couldn't stop to play.

I came to the crosswalk quickly. The road in front of me was huge, like three of the big road I took to school. There were lights, and I had to walk up to a little triangle of pavement in the road to wait. I was nervous crossing alone, but I made sure to run fast. I managed to get across without any cars coming close to me, and I was proud of myself.

Now that I was on the other side, I only had a few houses between me and where I was heading. But I couldn't just go down the street in front of everyone's houses and walk into the woods. People would think I was weird for sure. Weirder than they already did. And I didn't know if anyone from school lived here. So I walked up the huge road, passing the houses. There was a sidewalk here, which was probably a good idea. It wouldn't be safe to walk on the curb of such a big and busy road.

I passed a lot of houses before I reached the end of them, where the woods bordered the road. I was going to go right in,

like I normally did, but I got anxious this time. I looked over my shoulder, watching cars go by. For some reason, I felt like I was being watched. What if Carter saw me, somehow? Or one of his friends? He'd never stop spreading rumors about what he'd think I'm doing in the woods.

I sighed, frustrated, and kept walking. I knew there was a gas station coming up. I walked along the treeline as the forest stopped for the gas station. I walked right to the back of the big parking lot behind the building, where nobody else was. Then I stepped into the woods.

It was instantly cooler and darker with the thick treetops above me. I breathed in the familiar air, full of green life, and felt calmer right away. I walked further into the woods, following the little trail that I always took. Around me, there were big, old leafy trees and some pine trees too, and lots of brambles, ferns, and little white trilliums on the ground.

This was part of a park in the Greenbelt. There was a trail not very far away, an official trail, but I preferred to be alone like this. I didn't like when people bothered me or saw me in the woods. They always asked why I was alone and what I was doing. It wasn't anyone's business. I was allowed to be alone if I wanted to be.

Well, on Fridays. Mommy goes out with her friends on Fridays, so I get to do what I want to. Sometimes I wished Friday would last all week.

After walking for a long time, I came close to the official trail. I crouched down, watching in the shadows. I looked both ways and waited until the people up ahead had gone so far that I stopped hearing them. I made sure nobody else was coming, then I hurried across the trail and back into the trees.

I walked parallel to another trail that was smaller, crossing

through sparser woods before crossing the path behind a building that I didn't know what it was. I made my way through the woods up to the side of the road, a different road than before. I had to cross it to go where I wanted to. I'd never been this deep, but the woods on the other side of that road were bigger, fuller, wilder. I wanted to know what was there. So far, the only wildlife I'd encountered had been a few birds, a few squirrels, and humans. I wanted to see a deer. I'd have to be really lucky, but I was good at being quiet in the woods.

I'd been doing this for a few years now. Pa said I had the guts and the smarts to be in the woods, so when I was five, he started taking me out here on the trails with him. We'd go off the path and he'd get me to identify animals and plants. He let me touch poison ivy once, to know how it felt. And stinging nettle. I hated that one, but now I would know what was happening if I accidentally touched it, and wouldn't freak out thinking it was something worse. When I turned eight, he started letting me go alone when Mommy wasn't around. Now I do it every week.

I peered out from the treeline to see up and down the long road. There was one car in the distance, coming from where the houses were. I stepped back into the shadow of a tree, watching it drive along. When it passed, I waited until I could barely see it before stepping up to cross. Another car was coming and I had to swiftly backtrack without making too much movement. I held my breath, staying as still as possible. The car drove past and I strained to see in the windows. It was only one person, and they were looking right ahead at the road.

I let out a sigh of relief and waited until I was completely sure nobody would see me, then I jumped over the ditch and bolted across the road.

I stumbled down a slope and into a patch of sparse, low-

growing plants. A few young trees grew in the middle, but mostly it was bright, leafy green plants. I pulled up my socks and walked around the edge of the clearing. Walking straight ahead took me to a large patch of new growth forest, where the trees and other plants were young and small. I eventually came to a big open field between this young woodland and a darker, denser one.

I found a small log to sit on at the edge of the first woodland. I wiped my forehead of sweat and looked up at the sky. It was getting dark. Maybe I should go home. I swiped a blackfly off my arm and scratched at the bite. I didn't want to get eaten by flies out here. Standing up, I turned around to head home, but a sound made me freeze in my tracks.

It was a sharp yelp, like a dog in pain. But not quite a dog. I felt cold in my stomach. I didn't want any animal to be in pain or danger, but something felt wrong about this. Trying to shake the feeling, I grabbed the nearest big stick I could find and set off in the direction of the sound.

It took me towards some thicker, older trees. I walked slowly and carefully, watching the ground and keeping my eye out for any animal and any trap. And, most importantly, any humans. If someone was out here trapping, they might be waiting, and they might have a gun. The thought made my whole body feel cold and weak. I didn't think this was a good idea, suddenly.

What would Pa do? He taught me nobody should ever hurt an animal for no reason, but…

The animal yelped again. I swallowed hard and carried on.

I made out the shape of the fallen tree first. It was huge, and its roots had been torn from the ground to reach into the air. The ground where they had been was open like a wound, dirt flung everywhere. I hadn't heard anything like a crash, so it must

have fallen a while ago, but not long enough that things had settled down around it. The trunk was long and wide around, partially laying across a small gulley. The branches were mostly broken to the sides, but a mess of them stretched out across the ground and tangled around trees on the opposite side of the gulley. That's where I stood, looking across the short stretch of undergrowth. Under the branches, struggling, there was a dog.

But not quite a dog.

I walked slowly up to it. My heart was racing but somehow I felt very calm. I was aware of every crack under my feet, and so was the animal. It stopped moving. I did too.

Had it died?

It took me a couple minutes to start walking towards it again. It lifted its head and I jumped, raising the stick to defend myself. It whined pitifully. It was trapped and hurt. It must have tried to go under the tree and got stuck, since there's no way this tree had just fallen. Or maybe it had been trapped here for ages…

I didn't know what to do. This was a wild animal. And it wasn't a dog, I knew that much. So close to it now, I could see it was much, much bigger than a dog, with small, amber eyes and a long face.

This was a wolf.

Pa told me if I ever came across a coyote, however unlikely that was, I was to stay clear of it. It had to be even more important for wolves. But this wolf wasn't growling at me, or even showing its teeth. It was trying to get out of the tree branches it was stuck under. And Pa also told me I should never let a life go to waste.

I took a step closer. The wolf looked up at me. Now I was only a few inches away. Shaking, I used the stick in my hands to push away the branches above the wolf. Instantly, the wolf's

growl split the air. I froze in shock. Hadn't I been doing so well? The wolf scrambled forward and before I could do anything about it, it bit my leg.

I screamed. The pain seared through my body. It let go right away. Hot blood was running down my leg, making my socks and shoes wet and warm and red. I fell back, clutching my leg and breathing in sharply through my teeth.

"Oh God," a woman's voice said.

Frantically, I looked around, but there was only me and the wolf, now standing clear of the tree.

She opened her jaws and spoke again. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you were a kid."

I couldn't say a word. I stared at her, eyes wide, tears fogging my vision.

Blood, my blood, glinted on her teeth as she talked. "I… I'm sorry. It's too late, I'd take it back if I could. Christ… It's only going to hurt the first couple times. And, um, don't worry about the moon. That's all I can do for you. I'm sorry."

"I… I…" I struggled to find anything to say. "You can talk?"

She shook herself, gave me a final sorry look, and sprang over the gulley. And then she was gone.

I didn't let myself sit there for a long time. I dragged myself to my feet and just started running, even with the pain searing through my leg. First back into the clearing, then back into the young forest and far, fast to the road. My leg throbbed and blood ran down it as I forced myself to run, run, run. I hit the shoulder of the road and dropped down, wiping the tears from my face and looking both ways before crossing. I hobbled around the perimeter of the building's lawn, then found the small path and followed it closely. As I got closer to the big path, I had the wild idea that maybe I could go to the parking lot and

get a ride home. It hurt so much, putting any weight on my leg made me bleed more, and I couldn't stop the tears from running down my face. Bugs kept going at my leg too. Everything hurt, and I didn't want to admit it, but I was terrified.

I couldn't explain this, though. Who would believe me? I wanted Pa.

I made my way across the path and up through the long, long stretch of woods up to the gas station. There, I sat down and used my shirt, which was thankfully red, to wipe up the blood on my leg. It didn't really work because it was drying. I could only hope there weren't a lot of people outside. It was getting kind of late anyway.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I jumped and looked up. There was a man standing a few feet away.

"Are you lost?"

"I…"

"It's okay, kid. Do you want to call your parents?"

I rubbed at my face. Fear and relief filled me. I just nodded.

"Okay, come on into the Circle K. Are they out hiking?"

I pushed myself to my feet and shook my head.

"Are you out here alone? Oh, do you live in those houses over there?"

I shook my head again.

He nodded. "Hmm. Let's give them a call, okay?"

I nodded. I silently followed him to the gas station, limping.

When we walked into the light, he saw my leg and gasped. He asked what happened but I didn't have an answer. He just hurriedly opened the door and brought me inside.

"I need a first aid kit," he said as he walked up to the counter, "and to use your telephone."

The next half hour was a blur. They cleaned my leg with that burning alcohol and put bandages around it. They kept asking me what happened, but I was too afraid to say anything. When the man asked if I'd been bitten by a dog, I hesitated. I didn't want to lie.

But what else could I say?

I nodded.

He looked at the worker. She was worried. I felt like I did something wrong, but she just got the telephone and asked for the number to call. I quietly said it and she dialed.

"Hello, this is Asha from the Esso… Yes I'm sorry sir, it's just, well your son came in here with a man, no, well, he's been bitten by a dog. Uh-huh. Yes. Yes, near the trail. Okay, yes sir. Just a moment."

She handed the phone to me.

"Morgan?"

"Pa," I cried, then broke into sobs.

"It's okay buddy, oh… It'll be okay. I'm leaving right now. I love you, Morgan."

"I love you too, Pa."

He hung up. I held the phone for a minute before giving it back to Asha.

Pa came and picked me up. While he drove, I cried in the back of the car. He asked me questions, about how they treated me, about the man, about the dog, about what happened. I told him everything. Almost everything. I told him it was a big black dog I've never seen before and no, there was nobody around.

"Oh, Morgan. You're lucky to be alive." He looked at me in the little mirror. "Tomorrow I'll teach you and Trace how to get away from a dog, okay?"

I nodded and sniffled.

"You seem to be well versed already," he said with a smile, but I could see that he was worried.

I was, too, but I could never tell him why.

* * *

That night, after I got out of the bath and Pa put new bandages on my leg, I went right to my room. I curled up in my bed, my head spinning. I felt dizzy and my whole body hurt like a headache and a tummy ache combined. I threw off my blankets, too hot, then pulled them back on, too cold. I got out of bed and paced around my room, panting. The world felt thick.

Then there was pain. It was bright, and it was everywhere. I'd never broken a bone, but I saw someone break their arm when they fell on the ice at school. I think this is what it would feel like if you break all the bones in your body.

I closed my eyes and pressed my teeth together, but it wasn't really my choice. My body was doing it if I wanted to or not. My muscles wrenched themselves off my bones and my body felt like the wolf bite everywhere. I lost my balance and fell to the floor, but somehow, I caught myself silently.

I opened my eyes.

I was looking down at paws.

"What?" I said out loud, but I heard a weird bark. I whirled around. There was a flash of brown fur, like a tail, and there were back legs too, and they had my clothes, and they moved when I moved. "What's happening to me?"

"Trace, is that you barking?" I heard Mommy say downstairs.

"No!" Trace giggled and ran down the hall.

I hadn't heard when she got home. What time was it? I looked towards the window and it was bright out. I whimpered. What

was going on? Maybe I just woke up. Maybe it was a dream, maybe I was still dreaming. I shook myself but it felt different. No, it felt the same. The same as a few minutes ago. I felt… A tail. My tail. Fur. In my mouth, sharp teeth.

Carefully, I tried to wiggle out of my clothes. Once I had my shirt off over my head, I could easily step out of my shorts. I winced. Putting weight on my leg hurt, my back leg. I turned and sniffed it. Blood. And the bandages.

This can't be a dream.

I heard someone come up the stairs and I panicked. I scrambled under my bed.

"Morgan, is that you playing in there?" Mommy asked through the door. "Come downstairs for breakfast first."

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it quickly.

"Morgan?"

I had to turn back.

She sighed. "Are you awake? Do you know what time it is?"

How do I turn back?

"I know it's a Saturday, but it's late."

I felt my bones shift. I whined sharply, the pain was so sudden I couldn't help it. I struggled under the weight of the whole planet against my spine so I could get out from under my bed. My shoulders rolled and my hips split and I couldn't breathe. And then it was done. I collapsed, gasping for breath, on the floor.

"I'm going to open this door and you'd better be—"

"Don't come in I'm getting dressed!" I yelled.

She was silent for a moment. "Don't you raise your voice at me."

"I'm sorry, Mommy…"

She huffed. "Get downstairs for breakfast." Then she stomped

away.

* * *

At school on Monday, I spent recess playing tag. I was suddenly faster than any of the other students. Even Carter. He was one of the fastest kids at school. In our grade, anyway.

He was the last person left to tag before we'd caught everyone. I gathered with the other kids and told them I wanted to be the one to get him. I got a couple of kids to wait near the play structure and chase him up so he had to go down the slide. I waited under the slide, listening.

I closed my eyes. It was like it opened my mind to the whole playground. I could hear everything. Overwhelmed, I opened my eyes and breathed steadily for a minute. Then I went back in. And I focused on Carter. He was coming. He was followed closely by Jane and Rhianna. I wanted to peek out but this was better than seeing. I didn't understand it but it felt so natural.

Now Carter was on the play structure. Someone lunged at him and he jumped up to the slide platform. He went down the slide and I exploded out from under it.

He screamed.

I jumped.

My arms wrapped around him. We hit the sand and rolled, struggled, but I forced myself up and on top of him. My eyes snapped open and I was staring down at his face, inches away.

He was terrified.

I bared my teeth and growled deep in my chest.

Fear shone in his eyes. He screwed up his face and pushed me off. I let him, watching him and catching my breath as he stormed off.

Jane and Rhianna ran over to help me up.

"That was awesome, Morgan!"

"Yeah, where did you learn how to do that?"

I laughed awkwardly, brushing the sand off my sweaty arms. "I don't know what you mean."

* * *

"Okay everyone, that's the bell. Good work on your math sheets today. We have a new lesson to start tomorrow."

I put away my worksheet in my desk. I didn't do a lot, but it was enough for Miss Crosby to smile at me when she came around to see what I had done.

I left the room and got my stuff. Then I went out the door. I walked out past the crowd of kids and parents and right up to the bus stop. Andrew smiled and waved at me. I nervously waved back. Then when I was passing him and his friends, I noticed Carter. He was hiding behind Andrew.

I narrowed my eyes. Was he going to chase me again?

I didn't want to run this time. I felt… I felt confident. I walked calmly along, crossed the street, and kept going. I closed my eyes. I focused. He was far away. Still with Andrew.

A smile broke out on my face and didn't go away the whole way home. Carter wouldn't be bothering me any more. And if he did, I guess I had the strength now to put him in his place.

Shebal's Surprise

It was a beautiful day in July: the sun was shining but it wasn't too hot, a lovely breeze was blowing, and everything was bright and green. With Ramadan around the corner, Shebal decided to give Hafsa a fun day out in the city. It was the perfect day for it. They were visiting their human family in Ottawa because Shebal wanted to spend the week with his friends from school, but today he wanted nothing more than to be with his little sister.

"I'm going to the mall," he said, poking his head into her room where she was playing with monster trucks on the carpet. "Want to come?"

Hafsa looked up at him with the same curious judgment that she'd become known for since he decided to try an emo hairstyle. "What, do you need more goo for your silly hair?"

He laughed; she couldn't get under his skin. Not today, at least. "Yeah. But I also want to get you a new toy."

Her face lit up and she dropped Gravedigger with a bang. "Oh, we're going to the far mall? Can we walk through the river?"

He grinned and nodded. She loved St. Laurent because of the big toy store in it. Plus, it was closer than the Rideau Centre to the other surprise he had in store for her today.

She squealed with glee and then yelled at him to get out of

her room so she could change.

He rolled his eyes with a smile and shut her door. Taking out his flip phone, he hammered out a few texts to his friends, then ducked into the bathroom to check his hair. The swoopy fringe looked awesome with his naturally white hair, and he'd added a streak of blue for the edge factor. He snapped a grainy photo of himself biting his lip and daringly sent it to his new girlfriend before Hafsa burst into the bathroom, wearing her favorite new skirt— her favorite because their family had finally found a frilly one in dark green— and her dinosaur shirt.

Hafsa had come out two years ago, when she was only four years old, but her tomboy tendencies hadn't stopped. Shebal was fiercely proud of her, looking down at her fiery grin. Both their human and catfolk families had been so good about everything. The rest of the world had him to go through if they even thought about dimming her shine.

"Let's go already!" her impatient cry shook him out of his thoughts and the two of them thundered to the door.

"Going to the mall now, be back later!" Shebal called to their human parents before shutting and locking the door.

They lived in a tall apartment building right beside the Rideau River. There was a bridge just a few blocks away, but Hafsa loved swimming through the river as a lion, so they walked down to the rapids where it was safer to cross. Shebal shielded her so she could get undressed and transform. As soon as she was in her lion cub body, she jumped into the water, leaving Shebal to scramble carefully after her, carrying her clothes and a towel above his head.

Once they'd reached the other shore, she quickly transformed back. He dried her off and helped her get dressed again. Then they hurried through the park— normally Shebal would have

let her play, but they had a secret schedule to keep, so he complained of being too hot to hang around— and caught a bus. Hafsa had her hands and face pressed to the dirty window the whole time, despite Shebal telling her she'd get germs.

They soon arrived at the mall, trekking through the parking lot to get to the door.

"Hey, stay with me," Shebal called, jogging after an excited Hafsa to grab her hand. "Don't run away from me. Especially not in a parking lot."

She kept thumping her feet as she walked. "But I want to go to Toys R Us!"

"We won't if you run away."

She huffed, but walked normally beside her brother.

The AC was a welcome change after the long walk and hot bus. Shebal wanted to get his more adult chores out of the way first, so he brought them to Shoppers to get more hair spray and dyes in a few new colors. He was considering experimenting with rainbow hair, but wasn't sure how his friends at school would react. He ended up just choosing purple and a new shade of blue.

After he finished paying, Hafsa dragged him by the hand across the hall into Toys R Us. She made a beeline for the Lego section and begged Shebal to get her the brand new Lego Ninjago Skull Truck set. Of course, it didn't take much persuading.

They were hungry after their long journey, so they went upstairs to the food court, where Shebal bought them A&W. They enjoyed burgers and root beer floats, and split some onion rings.

After all that, Hafsa was still pretty wired, which was great for Shebal. Instead of catching a bus home, they went out to

the parking lot and he called a taxi. She was so engrossed in reading every inch of her new toy's packaging that she didn't hear him telling the driver where they were going. She didn't suspect a thing until they pulled into the parking lot of Cosmic Adventures!

As Shebal handed the cash to the driver, Hafsa squealed with delight and scrambled out of the car. He suppressed a giggle, watching her run up to the curb and wait for him.

He jogged to catch up with her, calling, "What is it with you and running away from me today?"

She threw her arms around him in a tight hug once he'd caught up. "Thank you thank you thank you!" she chanted. "How did you know I love Cosmic Adventures?"

He grinned. She'd been talking about it non stop since her classmate's birthday party a few months ago. "I listen."

Bouncing up to the doors together, neither of them could contain their excitement. This was going to be so much fun! Stepping through the doors, they saw the biggest surprise of the day: all of Hafsa's friends were already there, waiting for them!

As her classmates cheered upon seeing her face lit up with joy, she hopped on her toes and crushed her big brother in a hug again before running to join them.

"Have fun, little lion!" He grinned, waving at her as she scampered off. He was so grateful to see her this happy and carefree. He paid for their entry and sauntered over to where his friends were waiting for him in the back of the building, playing in the arcade.

Most of his friends who he'd invited had shown, but he couldn't see his girlfriend among them. He asked one of the guys and he said he didn't know where she was. Oh well, it's

not a big deal. He's got his buddies, plus cheap greasy pizza to eat and crappy little prizes to win.

And best of all, he knew as he heard Hafsa's laughter over the sounds of the arcade games, his little sister was having the best day ever.

Grandma's Stories

"You know what goes on past that old cow fence," his sister chided as she marched through the tall, swaying grass toward the creek. "Grandma's told you to steer clear of that abandoned farmhouse in the swamp, and she's made it clear why, too. What's got you so wound up about it?"

The boy fiddled with the torn strap of his overalls, wading after her. "You're the one bringing me out here. Answer that yourself."

She huffed but gave no answer.

They arrived at the creek in no time, standing only a foot or so above the water. It looked pleasant on the surface, but below, the current was strong enough to drag the eight year old boy away. He watched his older sister carefully navigating the sloped path to the culvert. She knew her stuff, especially when it came to ranging around in the woods behind Grandma's house. Would she be strong enough to pull him from that secretly raging creek if he slipped and fell in? Would she react fast enough if something went wrong? He tried not to scare himself with the improbable, but it was hard to keep his thoughts from wandering.

"Come on, what are you standing there for?" his sister shouted from the other side of the culvert. "Earth to Sid. Let's

go!"

He blinked and focused his eyes on the plank of wood at his feet. It was short and mottled with rot. It led to the mossy top of the culvert, where his sister's boot prints were still visible. He swallowed hard and started his shaky procession. When the old metal culvert groaned under his weight, he jumped and landed beside his sister on the opposite bank.

"Scaredy cat," she teased, giving him a friendly punch on the shoulder.

"You're a big mean brat," he shot back, jabbing her in the ribs.

"Well, this big mean brat is doing you a favor," she said, rolling her eyes and blowing a lock of her unruly hair from her face.

Her little brother sheepishly turned his attention back to the strap of his overalls.

The two set off again, following a faint path through the sparse, scrappy woodland. Often, he had to break a branch as it snagged on his hoodie. They were bare, and the twiggy fingers were hungry after dropping their leaves in the fall. The wet carpet squelched as they plodded along. The siblings were silent until they reached the rusted line of wire that snaked its way through the trees.

"I'm not taking you past this point," his sister said, folding her arms across her chest.

"Scared of a little mud?" he jeered, rolling a rock under his foot. Through the flimsy rubber sole of his rain boot, he could feel its sharp edges like teeth on his toes.

She glared at him, her eyes as cold as the last whimper of winter in the air. "It's not a joke, Sid, I'm serious. You know as well as I do about what goes on past this fence." Her lips quirked up into a mean smile as she started to tell it like a scary story. "We both knew the kid who went walking out here with

his friends last summer and never came back. They say he saw the most beautiful horse he'd ever laid eyes on, and he just had to get a closer look."

He looked down, studying the tracks left in the malleable earth. He didn't like when she got so intense about this kind of thing. He was interested in the stories, but he knew they didn't happen for real. There was nothing supernatural about that boy vanishing… Maybe some foul play, but nothing like this.

Her breath was hot in his face. "All of a sudden, it was over for that boy! He was fish food. They had to fill his coffin with rocks. And if I'm being honest, I want to look pretty for my funeral."

He furrowed his eyebrows and stuck out his tongue. "Don't say things like that, Genette."

"Well don't make it cross my mind." She mimicked the way one would hold a rifle, staring down the barrel into the swampland. "Someone ought to take a gun and blam! Get revenge for that poor sucker. Too bad it's just fairytales, huh? What a trophy that would make!"

He scowled at her again, not appreciating being made fun of. He didn't want to be on the business end of her gun, though. He looked out past the fence, the glint of sunset light catching off a bit of silver on a barb. With a sigh, he turned and followed their trail back to the creek.

"Let's go in for dinner."

"Alright by me."

* * *

Past the fence, there stood the abandoned farmhouse where the floor had turned to a deep, murky pool. The property used

to be home to a small family and their cattle, but the deed had long since been handed over to the wild, secretive swampland. Floating along the surface of this pool, among the lily pads, the cattails, and the reeds, there was a young black horse. She was lovely: her glossy pelt was pristine, her long, black mane and tail were somehow free of tangles, and her form was exquisite. But there was something strange about her, too. Her mouth was too long, and her ears had a translucent membrane over the openings. Her striking yellow eyes were covered by a blue film, and when she raised her elegant neck above the surface of the water, opening her mouth almost to the jaw hinge to breathe in the musty air, rows of sharp, canine teeth glistened in the half-light.

"Maron," floated down a nervous voice from the platform of rotting wood a few feet above the pool, "is it safe to come down?"

"Yes, little ones. We're alone again." The mare sank back into the water. Bubbles drifted up from the edges of her mouth.

Two small foals trotted down a set of steps that only reached halfway to the pool. They leaped the rest of the way, splashing into the cold, muddy water. One of the foals was fully rust red, while the other was a palomino. They both had Maron's haunting features.

"What was all the commotion?" the golden colt asked.

Maron drifted in lazy circles around the two, watching them spin as they tried to follow her. "A pair of humans came close. They only went to the fence, but they were closer than I like them being."

The palomino flicked his ears. He wasn't convinced, but he wasn't about to argue with his grandmother. His sister, though, wheeled around in the water joyously, begging her to tell them

more.

Maron's eyes twinkled with delight, but her tone was still grim. "They were young, so they weren't really a threat, but young ones are curious and tend to run their mouths. Besides, you remember the time one of their adolescents came wandering in here."

The filly nodded enthusiastically. "Tement caught him and ate him," she said, referring to the old, stunning kelpie stallion who lived farther down the creek from them.

"That's what he'll tell you," her brother snorted, shaking out his short, fluffy mane.

Maron narrowed her eyes. "Sunlight, do you not believe me?"

Sheepishly, he paddled in place, letting himself sink a little. "I don't mean to be rude, Maron, but… They're just stories, right? The humans, I mean. They're so small and weak, they couldn't possibly be the ones responsible for the terrible noises in the sky and the roaring creatures past the fields that make the ground shake. They can't be real, it just doesn't make sense."

Maron broke her circle, swimming out to the crumbling wall of the house. Looking out into the woods, she admired the dual presence of buds on the trees and snow on the ground. This small place was thriving, and it was theirs, beyond any reaches. If her grandchildren thought mankind were stories, then perhaps she had done a good job.

"I suppose that does make sense, Sunlight," she said wistfully, looking back at the two foals she loved so dearly, "and you are getting old now… Too old for fairytales. But I wouldn't go telling Tement that. His sharp teeth and his strength are no tall tale."

Big News

"Moms, Dads, I've got big news for you."

Everyone— Ripley and both sets of his parents— had gathered together for dinner at Ripley's dads' house on the first Saturday after camp. They were all sitting at the small dining table in the kitchen, the back door open to let in the warm breeze. Ripley sat at the head of the table, on the side that wasn't pressed to the wall. He pushed his plate of fried chicken, collard greens, and mac and cheese to the middle of the table to make room for his bulging field handbook.

Ivy, his mom's wife, raised a sleek eyebrow and sipped her lemonade. "Big enough to not even finish dinner? Wow."

He smiled sheepishly and rolled his eyes. "I'll finish it! You know how good Mom's cooking is."

"Oh yes I do," Ivy giggled, pressing a kiss to her cheek as she grinned and covered her face with a delicate hand. "Tonya's the best cook."

"She so is," Ripley's dad's boyfriend admitted, "even better than you sometimes, Aaron."

"Thank you, Brian," Tonya said with a hearty laugh. "You should visit more often. And bring your horchata and those churros you made last year."

"Oh, your churros are to die for," Ivy said.

Ripley didn't mind the interruption. He loved all his moms and dads… Tonya and Aaron, his biological parents, had gotten divorced when he was little because they both realized they were gay. The split was amicable, and even though it was hard for Ripley at first, seeing them still get along and still come together to raise him helped a lot. He spent one week at his dad's in the house he grew up in, and one week at his mom's new condo downtown. This let him go to school downtown, since he had been bullied quite a bit at his elementary school in Beacon Hill and had wanted a fresh start.

He wanted to let them chat about food, because he knew this was going to be a tough sell, but they had their attention back on him momentarily.

"So, what's your announcement, buddy?" his dad asked.

His cheeks heated and he looked down at his book. Then he looked back up and said, "You know how I've been working tirelessly for the past, what… All of my life," he laughed, "to prove that Silent Woods is real? That magical place where the past is suspended out of time, where wonderful things are created every single day? Where anything you could possibly imagine comes to life?"

Tonya nodded, her eyes sparkling. "Of course! I still remember the first creature we named together. The frogcruncher."

Ripley smiled brightly even though he kind of knew she was… Well, not pitying him, but she didn't really believe in it. Not as much much as he did, anyway. She still thought of it as their game from when he was little. But that was about to change.

"Did you find more things for your book while you were at camp?" Brian asked.

"You can say that again," he said, getting jittery with excitement. "I met a werebear, an orc, a vampire, a werewolf, a girl

who can talk to animals… And I even helped stop a conflict between the catfolk and lakefellows who lived there!"

Tonya's smile widened as she listened to her son talk, her cheeks squishing up her beautiful, dark eyes. "You should tell us all about that, Ripley."

"I will! But I have to tell you something more important first. Much more important." He rolled his shoulders and took a deep breath. "Silent Woods… Is something I've been searching for my whole life. I've devoted countless hours to it: countless nights searching online and in books, countless detours on road trips chasing some glimmer in the woods or some weird figure in the cornfield."

Aaron's chuckle rumbled deep in his chest.

"I've gotten really close before," he went on, "and I've got plenty of proof in this book already. But last month changed everything. This wasn't just a weird website disappearing, or a book full of secrets appearing in the library but not in their computer system, or a TV program that comes on late and night and doesn't show up on the TV guide. I," he paused to let out a shaky breath, grinning, "I interviewed a vampire! I hung out with a werewolf! The— the counselors could turn into a tiger and a bear!"

The four adults were staring at him now, and he could tell they weren't really hearing him. Under the love, there was a mix of pity and concern on their faces, and he hated it. He got hot under his clothes and fidgeted. He couldn't lose their faith in him.

He flipped to the page where he and Ronnie had gone over some things about what it was like being a vampire. "Look, this is my interview with R— with the vampire. It's all here! We talked about how he feeds on farm animals but doesn't take

enough to kill them, and how his saliva has a calming property that helps with the process of harvesting blood, and how he and his mom turn the blood into little pills and condiments and drinks, and how he needs food because really he's half vampire but his mom just throws up—"

Aaron put his hands up and said, "Hey, hey, slow down buddy, take a breather."

"No," Ripley said desperately, clutching the book. "You have to believe me. Please!"

"We believe you," Brian said. "Really."

Ivy shot him a look, but stayed quiet.

Tonya took her wife's hand and said, "We… Well, Ivy, would you like to…?"

Ivy glanced at Aaron, a question in her eyes.

He pressed his lips together and gave her a little nod.

She turned to Ripley, holding Tonya's hands tightly, and said, "Ripley, the reason we thought that camp was such a good fit for you wasn't just because it was out in the wilderness like you like to be."

"It is a sort of mental health support experience," Aaron said softly.

"This isn't—" he cut himself off, closing his eyes and leaning down towards the table. If he freaked out now, he knew they'd never believe him. He had to keep it together. He had to convince them, but how? He didn't know what more he could say. Of course this sounded crazy. They hadn't been there! They'd seen things with him here and there over the years, but did they ever really see them? Or were they simply looking?

Aaron reached out to him and said, "It's okay, buddy. Do you need a minute?"

"No," he said in a small voice. "I need… I need you to call

Shebal and Jason. They'll tell you. They'll explain."

He could picture them all sharing looks until Tonya agreed and Ripley hurried to his room to decompress. He burrowed into his blankets and curled around his big plush dog that he slept with. He did breathing exercises and played music on his phone until he was calm enough to get out of his blanket cave and start organizing his stuffed animals in a row from lightest to darkest, then biggest to smallest, then grouping mammals and reptiles and birds, then…

There was a soft knock on the door.

"Yeah?"

Tonya asked, "Can we come in?"

"Yeah." He felt shy, but he had to face whatever this would be.

The four of them came in. Tonya and Aaron sat on his bed beside him, while Brian sat at his desk next to the bed and Ivy sat in the armchair in the corner opposite the door.

"So," Aaron said, taking one of Ripley's hands, "we talked to Shebal."

His lip trembled as he stared up at him.

"He explained everything. It's a lot, it's… It's hard for me to believe," Aaron admitted, "but you know we never stopped trusting you… We never stopped believing that this is what you experienced."

"It's just a bit mindblowing," Brian added, turning the chair from side to side, "that's all. You have to understand that we are, well, we are not young like you are, this hasn't been in our lives for so long."

"But it's been in our life for fifteen years," Tonya said, clutching Ripley's other hand, "because of you. And I remember all the wild and wonderful things we've seen together, all the way back when you were just a little boy, up until now. I'm sorry to

say I was always a little skeptical. As much as I really wanted to believe you, I… I don't know." She put her hand over her heart and closed her eyes. "You live long enough without miracles and magic that it starts to fade in your heart, even in the heart of the little girl you once were." Taking in a deep breath to let out a big sigh, she said, "Oh, Ripley, I don't even know what to say."

Brian cleared his throat as Tonya fanned her face to keep herself from crying. "Aaron and I have been going over your notes from our trips, you know, and I've always thought it all made so much sense. It's pretty out there, pretty fantastical, but… Well, I've seen some of the things you've seen. I remember the corn wolves. I remember the— the really big snake in Meech Lake, the one that laughed at us with a human voice? I remember the thing that we couldn't describe as anything but a pegasus, flying through the clouds at sunset while we were camping."

"I remember too," Aaron added. "I don't want to you think for a second that we thought you were making things up, or… Or…"

"Or that I'm like Victoria," Ripley whispered.

Aaron's shoulders slumped. "Yeah."

Victoria… Oh, Victoria. Ripley's older cousin. She had a lot of… Challenges, as the family called them. She saw things that weren't there sometimes, and believed some strange things that upset some of the family. She and Ripley had always been close, because they'd both always been weird. But even Ripley didn't see the things she saw, most of the time. He loved Victoria so much, and it hurt his heart when the family tiptoed around her experiences. He didn't want them to treat him like that, too.

"Do you believe me now? Now that you've talked to Shebal?"

"Yes," Aaron said, blinking away tears and nodding. "Yes, we

do."

Ivy, who had been sitting quietly and looking worried, finally said, "I'm sorry for implying that you're… I'm sorry. I just know, with Victoria… Her problems started around this age, and you know I have a friend who's on medication for, well…" She sighed. "I got worried about you."

"It's okay," Ripley murmured. He didn't take offense to it, at least not the comparison to Victoria and Ivy's friend. But it did kind of tire him out knowing that even his most beloved family members had to be convinced he was telling the truth about the same stuff that had gotten him bullied his whole life. "I'm not mad. I'm just glad you believe me now."

Tonya and Aaron crushed him in a hug, making him giggle. Brian and Ivy joined in, then Brian and Aaron revealed their big news for him, too: since they both had two weeks of vacation time to use, and Ripley still had almost half of summer vacation left, they'd decided to take him on a road trip… But not just any road trip. They'd gotten some advice from Shebal and were going to try to find a way into Silent Woods.

Ripley exploded up from his bed and jumped up and down, flapping his arms. "What! No way! How? I mean, you can't just walk right in, you have to—"

"You have to really believe," Brian said. "Which you absolutely do! And, if we're being honest, me too."

"And I'm about 99% of the way there," Aaron said.

"But the Woods has to want to let you in, too," Ripley said breathlessly. "What if it doesn't?"

"It let you in before, didn't it? And it's let us see so many cool things over the years. We'll never know until we try," Brian said.

Ripley spun in a circle and jumped back onto his bed. "Okay,

then we've got to try!"

Aaron tackled him in a hug again, laughing. "That's the plan, little man."

"So when are we leaving?"

"Are you able to wait three days?"

He nodded furiously. "I've waited years already! What's three more days?"

They all laughed.

"You had better take so many pictures for me," Tonya said, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I'm so happy for you! I can't believe this is happening."

Ivy covered her face and laughed. "Me neither. But I'll want to see photos too, okay Ripley?"

"Of course! You'll all be hearing everything about it. And maybe next time you can come!" He reached over his mom to grab his book from his desk. "I'd better start a fresh handbook… I'll call it Into The Woods: Dads Edition!"

Everyone laughed again. Ripley was so filled with warmth, he could hardly believe it too. This could not have gone better… And it was only the start of a new chapter of their lives.

He had so much packing to do!

Pride

Sunday morning, Genette woke me up with a knock on my door. I rolled right out of bed and shook the sleep off of me. Today we were going to Ottawa Pride! I was finally going to see Gwen again. It had only been a few weeks since camp ended, but I missed her a lot. I was sad that Hafsa and Ripley couldn't make it, though. They were both in Silent Woods, Hafsa with her family on the island and Ripley with his dads tracking wildlife. I'd have to pick out something cute for Hafsa, if I saw something she liked. Apparently there were going to be people selling stuff.

I brushed my teeth, then I looked for my best outfit. It was pretty nice weather here, but Googling the forecast for Ottawa showed it was going to be a muggy day. I grabbed a green tank top and a billowy red Hawaiian shirt. My favorite pants were in the laundry, so I settled for a nice pair of green swimming trunks with big flowers on them.

Breakfast was berry pancakes. We all ate together at the table as the morning sun shone through the window. Birds were singing outside, and bugs buzzed and tapped against the glass.

Grandma Fran and Uncle John teased Genette lightheartedly about seeing Ava, and she laughed it off and teased them back about how they still couldn't figure out the tree sap cake recipe.

On our way out, Grandma slathered me in sunscreen and

gave me a bucket hat. Genette ran to her room to change into her proper Pride outfit while John and I waited in the car. I took the hat off.

"So, you must be excited," he said after turning on the AC. "It's your first Pride."

I nodded, feeling a little embarrassed. I'd been out to my family for many years, but it still made me feel a little shy when they brought up anything to do with me being trans and bi. Genette and I had never discussed going into the city for Pride. It was something we didn't think too much about. Not that it wasn't enticing, it just seemed out of our reach, and a little too risky. We already faced enough harassment at school. We didn't need to step out of our comfort zone, not for this. But Gwen and Hafsa… They changed everything. I wasn't afraid to be myself if they were with me. For Genette, I'm sure Ava did the same.

Though, knowing it was just going to be me and Gwen, I was a little nervous. There were clearly some unspoken feelings between me and her. Plus, I was already overwhelmed enough at the idea of being downtown at Pride… If Gwen started panicking and crying, I didn't know what I'd do without the others to support her, too.

Not to mention Gwen's reaction to Hafsa and her parents being trans, way at the start of camp. I felt bad for that still being on my mind, with her having come out as nonbinary, but I couldn't shake the feeling that she'd say something rude again.

The door creaked open and I waved at Genette as she came out of the house. She looked great in a black t shirt with a single red eye on it, black jean shorts she'd cut herself, fishnet stockings, and her signature knee high black converse. She'd always had a pair in her size as long as I've known her.

She got into the back seat and put her phone into her little purse. She struggled for a moment with the chain as it was pressed into her back, telling John she was ready to go.

We all waved goodbye to Grandma as we went down the driveway and onto the road. John put on one of her Beatles CDs and I listened while watching the fields and houses roll by. We stopped at the nearby gas station for Tim Horton's, which only John wanted, then drove straight to Ottawa. After about an hour, we came off the highway. The exit we took brought us right where we needed to be, only a block away from where the booths began.

John parked in a gas station parking lot beside a big brick building with a red roof and a painted mural on the wall. As we got out of the car, he said, "You two keep in touch, and stay together, please. I'll be back to pick you up after dinner, or earlier, if you call. Stay safe and remember, if anyone's giving you trouble, stay near other people or go into a shop."

"Okay, we will," Genette said, fluffing up her hair and looking at her makeup in the side mirror; she'd done elaborate winged eyeliner. "Thanks for the ride. Love you."

"Love you too, Genette," he said, his worried face easing into a smile. "And you, Sid."

I awkwardly tried to hug him through the window, but he opened the door when Genette had moved and gave me a proper hug.

"I'm proud of you," he said, patting me on the back.

"Thank you," I said, warmth chasing away my nerves.

After he left, Genette and I sat on the curb in the parking lot. I picked at my shoelaces while Genette texted Ava. Being here was a little overwhelming. I didn't go into the city often; I had no reason to, and I'd only lived in a city when I was really little,

before moving in with Genette's family. It may just be because we're beside a gas station, but the stink was unbearable, and there was so much noise from the traffic.

"They're on their way over here," Genette said. "Do you want to grab a drink or anything from the corner store?"

"I'm okay."

"Wanna come in with me?"

I nodded, even just to get out of the sensory assault, and we walked up the edge of the parking lot by the fence. We cut in front of the case of propane tanks and the ice box to get to the doors. It was much easier to breathe inside. I followed Genette around the store as she got a small bag of chips.

Waiting in line, we listened to the girl ahead of us getting upset with the cashier for not letting her buy cigarettes.

"I know it was fake last time," she huffed, "but my nineteenth birthday was literally two days ago. This is my real ID. My name is Rebecca."

"I can't accept it, sorry," he said, and turned away from her fully.

She stuttered, trying to argue, but eventually just stormed out past us.

Genette rolled her eyes at me before going up to pay. She considered grabbing a candy bar too, but decided to save her allowance for stuff at Pride, then got flustered and hurried off to put the chips back. We left without buying anything and waited on the curb until Ava and Gwen arrived.

I spotted Gwen immediately because she was dressed in super fun clothes. She was wearing galaxy print leggings and a bright purple t shirt with a cat on it. She had a tangle around her wrist and a backpack covered in multicolored cats.

She bounded over, smiling wide. "Hi Sid! I missed you!"

"I missed you too!" I said, getting to my feet and awkwardly extending a hand to her, which she thankfully interpreted as a hug and not a handshake.

Genette hollered in laughter as she pulled away from a hug with Ava. "I love your hat, where did you get that?"

She blushed like a tomato and hid her face in her hands. "It's just a silly hat…"

Gwen giggled. "Henry and I bought it for her."

I laughed. It was one of those 'women want me, fish fear me' hats that had been popular in memes.

The rest of her outfit was pretty plain: a white t shirt with some band logo or something on it, a pair of beaten up jeans, and black Docs.

"Should we get going?" Gwen asked. "I'm starving."

"Me too. We didn't eat lunch," I said.

She laughed nervously and said, "Same."

"Let's go then," Ava said, still recovering. "We can find a restaurant or something."

The four of us split into pairs, Ava and Genette ahead of Gwen and I, and we walked across the parking lot to the big gray building behind the gas station. It was a Korean restaurant, one of Genette's favorites. As we looked through the windows, though, we saw it was pretty packed. We moved on.

Gwen and I chatted about how things had been in the short couple weeks since we'd last seen each other. We talked about how we both missed Hafsa and Ripley a lot, and the camp too, but we didn't talk about Henry. I didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

Across the street was a restaurant called Wilf & Ada's, which didn't look very busy at all, so we swung in to grab two poutines to share between us. As we waited, a couple burst in. One

complained loudly about the heat, taking off his silly yellow duck baseball cap to fan himself. His boyfriend gingerly took his sunglasses off for him so he didn't bump into the people right in front of them. The two moved to the wall to read the menu.

"Do you want anything, Ronnie?"

The loud one shook his head and pulled out a red Kool Aid pouch from his jacket pocket. His boyfriend ruffled his hair playfully.

Gwen tried not to laugh.

"Be polite," I whispered, smiling.

She giggled and smacked me on the arm lightly. I smacked her back and she burst into laughter. Genette had to tell us to go wait outside, so we looked through the books that were out in front of the bookstore beside the restaurant. Excited, she pointed out the rainbow flags hanging from the lampposts along the street. Then we moved on to look at the fenced off lot that took up most of the block.

"I dare you to climb it," she said, grabbing the fence and looking in at the mess of weeds and stones.

"No way. There's too many people." I gave her a sidelong glance. "What's up with you today?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're not acting like yourself."

"Yes I am!"

She definitely wasn't— but she was acting a bit like she had been when she was leading us around the swamp, looking for Red. I was going to tell her so, but a beautifully familiar voice called from up the street, "I thought I'd never find you guys!"

We both turned to see Hafsa, jogging towards us with a smile brighter than the sun. She was gorgeous: her pink hijab was

dotted with blue forget-me-nots to match her billowing blue jeans, and she wore a light and airy yellow dress with sleeves that flared out around her wrists. We ran to meet her and we all hugged.

"We thought you weren't coming!" I said, unable to keep myself from smiling ear to ear.

"My dads were helping Jason and Big Gus build a sensory room for camp, so Shebal let me come," she explained, excited. "I'm so happy to see both of you! I missed you so much."

I opened my arms to her and she threw herself into another hug, giggling into my neck.

"I missed you too!" Gwen said.

When I let her go, she looked at Gwen and said, "Oh hey, is that a tangle? Could I ask you some questions about what we should get for the sensory room?"

She blushed. "Uh, sure?"

"Sorry, I just mean, I know those are sensory toys…"

"It's okay, I can help," she said, "I'm just a little embarrassed."

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about!"

Ava and Genette came up from behind us with poutine. They said hi to Hafsa and offered to go back and buy her something, but she said she brought food, holding up her handmade leather purse.

We kept walking up the street, towards the festivities. Hafsa had already been through and she said it was great, but she didn't want to see much without us so she let out Toka right away to find us.

"Who's Toka?"

"Our pet passenger pigeon." She whistled and the bird flew down from a streetlamp to perch on her outstretched arm. "He and the rest of the flock work for us, sending messages to other

catfolk settlements, and to shops in Kentsville when we need to let them know we're coming to pick up a big order."

"I knew he was an actor," Ava said over her shoulder. "Back at camp, when the counselors were telling us about Silent Woods."

Hafsa laughed. "It's not like it wasn't true!" Toka flapped and she told him he could go home now, so he flew off.

We only had to walk two more blocks to get to the booths. There were tons of people in the street, since it was blocked off from traffic, and while I was completely unused to crowds, it wasn't as overwhelming as I thought it would be. There were people dressed in every color of the rainbow, in every imaginable way: leather, latex, and lace, big wigs and shaved heads, stilettos and platform boots and Crocs, laughing and talking and holding hands. Everyone here was like me in some way. I saw myself grown up, loving, living, having fun. I felt safe.

Two people twirled by on rollerskates. The one with buzzed hair and camo cargo pants had a bucket of glitter. They held it up, grinning. "Want some glitter?"

Gwen and Hafsa laughed and said yes. The other scooted towards us unsteadily and tossed handfuls at each of them. I tried to step out of the way, but excess glitter fluttered over and covered me, getting all in my hair. The first person grabbed the second's hand and they sped away, the long haired woman laughing and waving at us.

Hafsa squealed and ruffled my hair, telling me it looked like the night sky.

I blushed, pushing her away gently. "Stop that," I giggled.

She looked after the two people for a moment, then said, "The dark skinned woman with the braid, who was having trouble skating? I think she's a lakefellow."

"Oh? How can you tell?"

"You get good at telling these things if you've lived with them forever."

"Makes sense." I tried to shake the glitter out of my hair.

"I didn't know they could be people," Gwen said, then caught herself. "I mean, look like humans, I think."

"They can't. But I know some of them who buy charms that make them look human. Some even go and live in the Outside, living like they're human for their whole lives."

Weaving through the crowd, we lost Genette and Ava but I didn't really mind that much. It felt good to be alone with two of my best friends. Hafsa brought us to different booths that she'd been interested in: first, a pride flag booth, where we just grabbed some free stickers and pins, then a row of booths where different artists were set up. Gwen bought me a mug that I liked, with a Norval Morrisseau painting on it. One of the other booths had two ladies selling custom pins, stamped right there, and a bunch of cool lapel pins with different words on them: dyke, daddy, butch, femme, bear, twink, bitch, to name a few. I was too shy to get any of those. Gwen got a custom Spiderman pin, since there were a few old comics in their pile of materials to choose from.

As Gwen watched the pin being made with glittering eyes, someone came up to the stall. They had long, wavy green hair tied back in a ponytail, lots of freckles, and were taller than even Hafsa. They were kind of hunched over and awkward looking, clutching a school bag and looking self conscious in a flowy galaxy patterned skirt and baggy t shirt with the trans symbol airbrushed on. They had a beanie with bats on it that were the colors of the bi flag, so I asked where they got it.

"Uh," they said, looking at me with big blue eyes, "just a couple

booths that way." They pointed further up the road than we'd been.

"Cool, thanks!"

They smiled at Gwen. "Hey, we're matching."

She smiled and clacked her tangle together. "We are! My name's Gwen."

"I'm Nebula," they said, then quickly added that they use they/them pronouns.

"I use she/her! But I'm nonbinary too."

"Cool," they said with a smile.

Hafsa suggested we all hang out together, but they ended up breaking off to buy something to eat from the grocery store a few blocks up. I went to find those hats with Hafsa. She bought me one with the trans flag, but in a fun pattern of stars and moons, so it was a little less obvious. We also found a booth selling rainbow putties, so Hafsa bought one for Gwen and a couple for the sensory room.

We met up with Gwen near where the parade would end and got ourselves a good place to sit. She loved the putty, and gave Hafsa a hug.

"Where's Nebula?" I asked.

"She had to go home," she said, "but I got her number."

"They," I corrected.

"What?"

"They use they/them pronouns?"

"Oh! Yeah," she looked away, frowning. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay," I said, not wanting to get into it.

Hafsa changed the topic quickly and we talked until the parade became visible as it came up the street. We watched the floats go by. There were lots for things like banks and

stores and political parties, which I didn't really care about, but they gave out a lot of stickers and candy. I loved seeing the drag queens, the small businesses, and especially the students. It made me so proud that they were so confident in themselves, marching in front of everyone, holding up a huge rainbow flag together. Maybe I could be that confident someday, too.

"Woah," Gwen said under her breath, "are they all…?"

I followed her gaze to three people in the back of a pickup truck in the parade, which was decked out in little flags, painted with different comic book characters, and sporting a banner that said The Vine with a grapevine design. The shortest of them, a girl with short hair wearing a Pinky and the Brain shirt, was sitting in the Black girl's lap, and the third, a tall girl with wild brown hair, stood behind them with her arms around both of their shoulders.

I caught Gwen looking at me and I felt warm, warmer than the August heat. I tried not to think about it for the rest of the parade, and we had a great time.

As the parade wrapped up, I texted Genette to meet us outside the gas station where we'd been dropped off at. Gwen and Hafsa walked with me.

"That was so much fun!" Hafsa said. "I can't believe I've never been before. I've really been missing out."

"We should go together every year!"

"All of us?" Gwen asked, her eyes bright and her cheeks red.

"Of course," Hafsa said. "I wouldn't want to do it without you."

Gwen stopped us at the street corner, looking stressed and flustered. She struggled to start a sentence a few times.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Did I say something wrong?" Hafsa asked.

"No," she said, twisting her tangle instead of her hair. "I just can't stop thinking about those three girls I saw, on one of the floats… They were sitting together and looked so happy. They looked like they were in love, all three of them."

I didn't want to speak around the growing feeling in my chest.

"I didn't know you could do that, is all," she said, kind of dreamily.

Before either of us could respond, Toka flew down and landed on Hafsa's shoulder. She unwrapped a message on a little piece of paper that had been tied to his foot and told us Shebal would be coming to pick her up soon.

"Aw, okay," I said, reaching for her hand to squeeze it. "It was so much fun to see you. We have to try to hang out again before school starts."

"Yes! All three of us," Gwen said quickly.

"And Ripley too," Hafsa added.

We started talking about plans to go to Gwen's place, but something seemed knocked out of her. She ended the conversation by saying she probably couldn't have us come over anyway because Nebula was coming over. A pang of frustration stabbed at me, but Ava and Genette came to collect us before it could go anywhere. We said our goodbyes a little hastier than I would have liked, but Gwen's comments had really soured the mood.

Once I was alone with Genette, I asked her if she thought we could have Hafsa come visit for a day or two before school starts.

"Can't get enough of your girlfriend, huh?" she teased.

I rolled my eyes. "You ditched me for Ava pretty quick. Didn't Uncle John tell us to stay together?"

She stuck her tongue out at me.

I sighed and propped my chin up on my knees. "Maybe we're

both a little lovesick."

She pulled her phone out and sent a text. "I don't see why she couldn't come over," she said. "Gwen, too? I'd love if Ava—"

"No." I cut her off by accident. "Sorry. I mean, Gwen's… Busy."

She gave me a sidelong glance.

"Ava's fine, though," I said, trying to brush it off.

"Okay," she said, drawing it out. "If you say so."

When Uncle John came to pick us up, he asked how our first Pride was.

"It was great!" Genette said, and dove into raving about all the things she'd seen and people she'd met.

"How about you, Sid? Did you have fun?"

It was easy to say no and feel uncomfortable about things, but I didn't want my first ever Pride to be ruined. I thought back to picking out the hat with Hafsa, and watching Gwen's pin be made, and getting glitter dumped on us. It wasn't even much of a stretch when I said, "Yeah. Yeah, I had a lot of fun."

Believe In You

Ronnie's first summer as a graduated high schooler, supposedly a real adult, had been a total bust. While his mom didn't force him to get a job or anything, he felt like he should at least try, so he tried to write a resume. And that's about all he got done.

The past year, that final school year and the summer before it, had turned his life upside down. He'd found out things about himself, his family, and the world, things he couldn't decide if he benefitted from knowing or not. Sure, it was great to know he wasn't the only vampire— the only monster— in the world, that he didn't only have him and his mom, but knowing it was his fault that his dad left, knowing it was his dad's fault that he's crazy, knowing that he's crazy… It was too much.

All of that weight was too much. He'd barely graduated. Nowadays, even with the Silent Woods-friendly therapy he'd gotten into, he could barely get out of bed. He couldn't hold down a job. Not like this.

What was left for someone like him?

He lifted his palms from his eyes and looked over to see Barclay, his amazing boyfriend, perched elegantly at his desk, wearing a beautifully patterned red and blue button down. He'd cleared away all of Ronnie's weird thrift store junk— ceramic dolphins, paperweights, old bottles, a mini lawn flamingo—

to make a passable workspace. Ronnie, on the advice of his mom, had invited him over so they could get some work done together: Barclay on his jewelry making business, and Ronnie on applying to jobs.

Clearly only one of these things was happening.

Barclay had started his fashion business on Etsy after their summer away, and had since been so successful that he was able to get fancy tools to make all sorts of cool things from the comfort of his bedroom. He liked finding old jewelry to restore, but his main goal was making something new and wonderful out of things that would've gone to landfill. He made earrings, necklaces, bracelets, chokers, and sometimes even body piercings. He also experimented with sculptures made from junkyard scraps. A lot of his more artistic work was heavily influenced by his Mongolian and Jewish roots, and he'd even gotten an interview about it after selling some pieces at a local youth art show.

He was so impressive. Ronnie rolled onto his belly, leaning his chin on one hand as he smiled dreamily at him.

Barclay straightened up, tucking a strand of dark hair behind his ear. He looked over his shoulder with a small smile, catching Ronnie staring. "Hey handsome."

"Hi," he said. "Come here often?"

"As often as you'll let me," he quipped back.

"What are you working on?"

He held up a piece of paper covered in sketches. "Just planning at the moment. I found a really nice vintage pearl necklace, and I've got a bunch of red glass beads left over from that one project, so I'm brainstorming ways to make a choker that evokes vampire bites."

Ronnie gave a light laugh. "You've been really into vampire

imagery lately." His boyfriend had come a long way since the start of that summer, when he hadn't believed a single thing Ripley— or Ronnie— had said about Silent Woods.

"I wonder why," he said with a hum as he turned back around. "What about you, Nosferatu? Aren't you supposed to be job hunting?"

He dropped his head onto the blanket and groaned.

Barclay's laugh lifted his spirits, even though what he said was exhausting. "I still have my old manager's phone number. I could probably get you a job at Walmart."

"I don't want to work at Walmart. Have you forgotten how bright it is in there?"

"LED lights are not the same as the sun," he chided humorously. "Even I know that."

"You know what I mean."

"I do." He scribbled quietly for several moments. "What about working for Cherry?"

"I… I could do kitchen work, but I couldn't work for her."

"Why not? She'd hire you on the spot."

"I couldn't let her down like that."

"Li—" he cut himself off. He just nodded.

Things had been really hard for Ronnie lately. Everything swirled around his head: how his episodes always seemed to scare his mom more than him, even now, how he'd walked out of both jobs he managed to get and all three other interviews too, how he couldn't go a day without seeing bugs crawling up his arms or smelling rot in his food or feeling his skin slough off under running water. What started with the occasional… Scary shadow figure attack, had progressed into a daily problem that kept him too anxious to do much of anything.

It was so hard to keep himself from getting… Scary. He didn't

know what else to call it, when his fangs grew long and sharp, his face twisted monstrously, and a terrifying aura rolled off of him. He never did that at anyone. Anyone who was really there. But when the danger that crept up on him day after day felt life threatening, he couldn't always control his fight or flight reaction.

He hated seeing how it brought everyone else down, but he wasn't ready… He was in therapy, he'd been in therapy, he'd even accepted a low dose of Seroquel, but… He just wasn't ready.

Noticing how down he'd gotten, Barclay abandoned his sketching and came to lay down beside him in bed. Rubbing comforting circles on his back, he murmured, "Do you wanna do something else?"

"Like what?" came the mumbled reply.

Barclay kissed the spot behind his ear, working his way down his neck as he gently pushed him onto his side by his shoulder. Ronnie grumbled, but pulled his boyfriend closer, running his fingers through the short hair on the back of his head, into the longer, softer hair above. He guided him to kiss along his collarbones, happily sighing at the touch.

"Is this what you have in mind?" he asked softly.

Barclay nuzzled under his neck. "How about we go to Sugar Mountain?"

Ronnie gave a dramatic sigh, pushing him away, but said yes with a pleased smile. "I'd love to. I'm running low on gummy bears."

Barclay rolled out of bed and dragged Ronnie, giggling, to the edge with him. Ronnie freed himself and clambered to his feet. He found his hairbrush and fixed his hair, which he'd let grow a little, about halfway to his shoulders now. He grabbed his new

cat eye sunglasses and bedazzled jean hat that he'd been fond of recently, but was conflicted about changing the rest of his outfit. He was already in jeans and a t shirt, he'd throw on his bomber jacket and that would be that. But his eyes lingered on something in his closet that he hadn't worn yet.

He grabbed the bomber jacket off the floor and shrugged into it. "Let's go."

They took the bus to Blair, transferring there to get to Place d'Orleans. They got Subway first, then restocked on gummy bears, gummy worms, and chocolate covered blueberries. They decided to go to the Value Village near Blair instead of going straight home, but first trekked across the parking lot to No Frills to buy some cheap soda. Back at Blair, they caught the brand new LRT, rode one stop, and walked along a busy road to the thrift store.

"Maybe you could apply here," Barclay said offhandedly as they walked through the doors.

"I guess," Ronnie grumbled. "The thrift store job I walked out of was Salvation Army, so I could probably get away with it."

They checked out the costume jewelry first, sniping a few pairs of nice quartz earrings and a broken watch for Barclay's projects. Ronnie eyed some scarves noncommittally before Barclay said he wanted to check out the trinkets on the other side of the store. There, they went up and down each isle, scouring the vases, ceramic figurines, little clowns, and half-used candles for things Barclay could use. Ronnie found a really ugly blue candle full of little seashells that he just had to take home. They moved on to the DVDs and CDs briefly, gawking at a huge wooden wall hanging of a whale on the shelf beside the DVDs.

"If that was a dolphin…" Ronnie started.

Barclay laughed. "No way am I helping you carry that home."

"It's a good thing I'm not as into whales, then."

For a final check, they quickly went through the button downs and found nothing interesting, then the shorts, because even though it was September, Barclay was hoping to grab a new pair. He had gained weight recently and had to get rid of his favorite pair of jean shorts.

Ronnie stood by, trying not to look interested in this one pair of jean booty shorts, cut really short and patterned with red roses.

Barclay caught him looking and said, "Ooh, you'd look cute in those."

"What? Me?" He laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. "No, they're more you."

"Maybe, but I know you like roses." He picked them off the rack. "Plus they're a women's cut. Weird that they're on this rack then."

Ronnie stared at the shorts for a few beats before saying, "Then they wouldn't fit me for sure."

"I could always resize them for you," Barclay said, sifting through the rest of the shorts, handing the rosy pair off to his boyfriend. "I have a sewing machine."

"You could make them fit you, then," Ronnie said.

Barclay gave him a sideways glance and smiled. "You seem to be the one who wants them, though."

He sighed, exasperated. "I can't wear women's shorts…"

"Why not?"

He screwed up his lips, face slowly getting red. "Uh… When would I get to wear them? You know I don't really wear shorts."

"You could wear opaque stockings underneath," Barclay pointed out. "Black would look good with those."

His face turned completely red and he handed Barclay the shorts. "I gotta go to the bathroom," he said, then rushed away.

Barclay frowned as he watched him go, but put the shorts in the cart.

When Ronnie got back, he saw them there and stared at them for a long moment. Barclay put his hand on his arm and they shared a little smile before going to the cash.

Back at Ronnie's, they dug out his box of dryer sheets and potpourri to fish out a joint to share. Leaning out his bedroom window, they smoked it into more dryer sheets, watching the sun begin to set.

As Ronnie was sprawled out on his bed, contemplating a second joint and watching his boyfriend finish off the roach, he was reminded of earlier that day, when he'd agonized over job applications. He was really screwed, wasn't he? He didn't understand why he had to get a job before therapy fixed him. He didn't understand why therapy wasn't fixing him already. What was he doing wrong?

His phone buzzed with a text, cutting short his spiral.

Cherry: Hey dude want me to drop off some extra sandwiches later? Some of the premades didn't sell

"Hey babe, how's sandwiches sound?"

"Cherry's?"

"You know it."

"Fuck yeah."

Ronnie: oh ufck yes

Ronnie: thank youu

Cherry: Lol, you high again?

Ronnie: you know it

Cherry: I'll bring some cookies too. ETA 25mins

"She's on her way."

"Sweet."

Thinking about Cherry made him think about Morgan, and that made him think about how Morgan said her therapist isn't just aware of Silent Woods, but actually from it. She's even a lakefellow from Shimmering Lake. Morgan seemed to have her life together. Maybe he'd ask her about her therapist…

He sent her a text and hoped for the best. It wasn't long before she gave him Jason's number to ask him about resources, since her therapist wasn't accepting new clients at the moment.

Steeling himself for another nerve wracking exchange, he texted Jason and explained the situation. He got back to him fast, too, with some info about a supernatural support group, specifically for young adults who can transform.

A smile spread slowly across his face. Camp had helped him a ton, even just because he'd been able to make friends and get out of his room— and his head— a little. Maybe this would be like that. One on one therapy wasn't fixing him, but if he wasn't alone, if he was with a whole group of people just like him…

Before he knew it, he was telling Barclay all about his plan to start group therapy. "Or at least, I'm gonna try."

Barclay climbed into bed to lay beside him, resting his head on his chest. "I love you and I'm proud of you no matter what, baby."

He blushed and looked up at the ceiling, running a hand through Barclay's hair. "I'm gonna get a job this year. No matter what."

"I believe you," Barclay murmured, "and I believe in you, but you getting a job isn't gonna change how I feel about you."

"I… I just wanna… I want to be good enough for you."

"You already are, baby."

He tried and failed not to smile. "Thank you. I… I just—"

Barclay put his hand over his mouth and he giggled against it. Ronnie wrapped his arms around him and rolled him over so he could lay his head on his chest instead. The wind pulled at his curtains, sucking them in and then billowing them out, carrying the scents of fall in the suburbs into his bedroom as the two of them floated into sleep.

Camper Group Chat

Ripley: Heyy everyone Happy New years!!

Sid: Happy new years!!

Hafsa: happy new yearrssss yayyy

Gwen: :fireworks: :fireworks: :sparkler: :two: :zero: :two: :zero:

Gwen: who r all these new ppl lol

Ripley: I thought it would be cool to introduce you guys to the other campers from 2018!!

Ripley took a moment to tell everyone whose number belonged to whom, so everyone could get each other into their contacts.

Barclay: good morning class of 2019

Barclay: hope youre not too hungover

Sid: Most of us are 14 lol

Barclay: whoops lol

Gwen: how old r u?????

Barclay: old enough to drink in quebec

Gwen: ur from quebec????

Barclay: well,

Gwen: underaged drinking isnt a joke :anger: :anger:

Ava: leave him alonee gwen

Ronnie: blehh whats going on in here ripley

Cherry: Happy New Years strangers :heart:

Laurie: Great idea to introduce us, Ripley :) How was your experience at camp??

Hafsa: wellll we wanted to be more open about silent woods stuff

Hafsa: so stuff certainly happened

Hafsa: and i have updates about that actually!!! for the people who were there lol

Gwen: omg is red okay????

Hafsa: yes red's fine!

Hafsa: and!!!!

Hafsa: is genette awake

Sid: No

Sid: I can wake her up if you want

Hafsa: no she'll see it later

Hafsa: the snowspiders are thrivingggg

Hafsa: i meant to tell you guys earlier but winter break has been sooo busy omg

Hafsa: homework!!!! studying!!!! on top of all the stupid winter chores

Hafsa: do you know how hard it is to keep snow out of all our nests??? we live in a TREEE

Barclay: you live in a tree

Barclay: omg, wait, are you like

Hafsa: i'm a catfolk yes i'm shebal's sister it's old news

Hafsa: the SNOWSPIDRES YOU GUYSSSS

Hafsa sent a series of photos of the spiderlike creatures crawling across the snowy ground in the forest, their fuzzy white bodies hard to make out against the white background.

Gwen: awwww

Gwen: are any of them baby??

Hafsa: it's hard to tell but probably!!!

Barclay: what am i looking at rn

Genette: god

Genette: im up

Genette: wjat is this

Ava: Good morning Genette <3 <3 <3

Hafsa: HI GENETTE LOOK

She sent more photos of snowspiders, including one where her mittened hand was in frame, pointing at it as it raised its forelegs defensively.

Gwen: don't get bit :scream:

Ronnie: woah, i've never seen something like that before

Ripley: They're snowspiders! They're crablike invertebrates native to Silent Woods in regions that have a long, cold winter and a long, warm summer, like the majority of southern Canada and the northern United States. They hibernate during the warm months in cocoons made from a substance similar to spider silk, and are active from the first true frost to the last snowfall. They're so cool!

Genette: ahhh im so glad to see theyre all okay

Genette: even if you cant tell if thats baby or not

Laurie: Who's Baby?

Genette: uhh

Genette: i kinda took care of a snowspider during camp

Genette: long story

Gwen: how's red doing???

Hafsa: he's good!!! he's a lot stronger now, and he's very playful :3 he was so excited to see me when i came back

Hafsa: he's making friends with the lakefellows and some of the catfolk

Gwen: thats so good :pleading_face: :pleading_face:

Gwen: i wish i could see him again

Hafsa: maybe somedayy

Laurie: Who's Red??

Hafsa: oh lol sorry red is a baby kelpie we rescued

Cherry: WOW, it sounds like you got up to a lot more than we did

Ripley: Hey, we kinda saved the Catfolk, don't undersell yourself :p

Hafsa: LOLLL

Ripley: Anyway!! How was your NYE??

Hafsa: boringgg i wsih i had been in ottawa to see the fireworks

Cherry: They were cool!! Me and the gfs watched them together :heart:

Ava: i slept :thumbsup:

Gwen: i had a great time

Gwen: nebula came over and

Gwen: well

Gwen: we're dating now <3

Sid: Ohh

Sid: Congrats

Hafsa: that's nice :3 i wish i had been with sid

Sid: With me or in Ottawa?? lol

Laurie: Not to sound like a broken record, but who's Nebula???

Hafsa: just someone she met at pride

Gwen: nebula is my amazing partner obvs

Hafsa: not some other magical animal lol

Gwen: theyre not ""just someone"" :anger:

Gwen: theyre awesome and adorable and im going to go make them breakfast

Ava: make me something too

Gwen: no, girlfriends only

Sid: Hey Hafsa, how's your niece doing? I don't know how to spell the name

Hafsa: oh, bryllig is great!! growing up very healthy :3 still soooo tiny tho, apparently i was that small when i was a baby too and i just cant believe it

Hafsa sent a photo of a tiny baby held in Shebal's arms, wearing a yellow onesie and reaching up towards the camera with an inquisitive look. The baby looked human, aside from a long tail like an eel's, the tall webbed ears of a lakefellow, and amber eyes that were almost triangular. The baby's little feet were also sort of like a seal's flippers, but had more defined toes and heels like a human's. There was no hair on the baby's little head.

Barclay: ohhh she's precious

Barclay: i didnt know shebal had a kid, congrats <3

Hafsa: no pronouns for bryllig yet! it's just bryllig

Barclay: oh okay sorry! bryllig is precious <3

Sid: Awwww bryllig is adorable :heart: :heart: :heart:

Cherry: Oh, Bryllig is just too cute!

Sid: I'd love to visit sometime

Hafsa: YESS!!

Hafsa: i won't make you sleep in the tree tho lol

Hafsa: what about march break?? do you have any plans??

Sid: I don't think so

Ripley: What if we did a sort of camp reunion and had everyone come over?? So much has changed, it would be so cool for the first year campers to get to meet Red and Bryllig :)

Laurie: That could be fun!

Cherry: Yeah, that's a great idea! I'd love to meet the rest of

you too :heart:

Cherry: So does Morgan, she's still sleeping but I know she'd say yes

Hafsa: i'm sure we could figure something out!! i'll ask shebal

Ripley: Great! I'm so excited to see you guys again!

Ripley: I have a feeling that 2020 is gonna be a great year

Ava: yeah!! woo

Genette: :fireworks: :fireworks: :fireworks:

The Sullen Swamp

Sunday morning, eyes still wet from sleep, Morgan was blearily checking her phone after a nightmare woke her up crying. She may as well still be in the grip of it as she read the horrible news in the Discord server for people applying to or attending the Toronto Film School: three of her friends— or, at least, three of the people whose work she regularly commented on— were about to walk headfirst into their disappearances, or worse.

Majorarcana, thedinosaur, and twistedcyclepath992 said they were going to start on a new project, a found footage mockumentary about what happened to the hunter and his wife who had disappeared in the Sullen Swamp, the colloquial name for a stretch of weird, uninhabited swampland surrounding Little Croft, a town that wasn't even on the map.

She had to get there first.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and crawled out of the nest she'd slept in, a pile of her unwashed clothes, blankets, and stuffed animals that her girlfriends had given her over the years. She'd been sleeping alone in their computer room lately, working late into the night on her countless ideas for once she had real assignments in film school. She was also, unfortunately, still working on her high school assignments. She was almost done high school and couldn't be more ready to escape.

She left a note for Cherry, explaining that she had to borrow the car and would be, hopefully, back tomorrow, dropped the coordinates to the closest place that showed up on Google Maps near Little Croft, and opened the other group chat she was too ashamed to show her face in: the people she'd gone to summer camp with.

She begged someone to meet her at the Westgate Shopping Centre. She decided she couldn't handle the questions that were surely waiting for her, so she shoved her phone in her pocket, got into a clean shirt, then dragged herself downstairs and into the bright rainbow tie dye Volkswagen Bus that Cherry loved more than anything.

She patted her pockets to make sure she still had her wallet, keys, and phone, took a steadying breath, and drove.

It took no time for nerves to set in. Who was going to come help her? She kind of hoped it wasn't… Well, any of them, really. Since her desperate struggle to get into film school was such a spectacle, on top of the fact that her old volunteering gig at the community centre was ghosting her as she tried to crawl her way into gainful employment, she hadn't wanted to face what her friends surely thought of her now. Cherry and Laurie had been supportive, but of course they had, they loved her. Her old camp friends didn't have that obligation.

She checked the group chat.

Sid, the boy from the year after she'd gone, who she had never met, certainly had no obligation to be nice to her. He'd be there in an hour.

Out of courtesy, she privately explained to him what the situation was. Or, more accurately, what she was afraid it would turn into.

At the next red light, she fished some pale pink lipstick from

the glove box and hastily applied it. She tried to brush her hair while driving and nearly got into an accident, so she managed to hack away at her mats at the next few red lights and stop signs.

She met Sid in the parking lot. He was wearing a camo jacket and jeans, and there was a duffel bag on the ground beside him. He flagged her down as she was pulling up beside him.

She rolled down the window and said, "Hey Sid. Throw the bag in the back."

He opened the back door and tucked the bag under the table, then climbed into the passenger seat. "Bad news, huh?"

She nodded, squeezing the wheel. "I don't really want to go, but…"

"Who else will?"

She nodded again. "I'm glad you came."

"Because I've dealt with kelpies before?"

She winced at his tone. "Because I don't want to do this alone."

"Oh. Sorry. I'm—"

"I remember you got attacked," she cut him off gently. "I understand what that's like."

To survive the awkward silence, she plugged the coordinates into the GPS and drove. She knew that only the mouth of the Sullen Swamp would show up on any of these maps.

The swamp and Little Croft itself were not really in Ontario, at least not the Ontario everyone knew. They were part of Silent Woods, a sort of secret world above, beside, and beneath the Outside world. Most people didn't know how to get in, unless they'd been there before, or unless the Woods wanted them inside. But sometimes outsiders managed to get lost, take a wrong turn somewhere and end up where they shouldn't be. That's where the danger was. The couple who went missing

there were definitely victims of just that, and whatever may live in that swamp. She could only hold onto her desperate hope that her friends hadn't found their way too far in… Or, better yet, that the Woods wouldn't let them in at all.

But she had to check. She had to make sure.

She had to stop thinking about that or she'd crash the car. She put on a CD.

"So, um, how have you been doing so far this year?" Sid asked after a while.

"Eh, not bad." She immediately cracked. "Who am I kidding, I'm doing awful."

He laughed sympathetically. "Tell me about it."

"… Is that an invitation or just an expression?"

"I'm all ears."

"Well," she sighed, gripping the steering wheel even tighter, "I totally lost my chance at getting early acceptance to my dream school. Both my girlfriends' families are disappointed in me. One won't say it outright but I can feel it every time we go for a visit. My dad's the same way, I know subtle parental regret like the back of my hand."

"Both your girlfriends?"

Her hackles rose. Was that really the detail he'd chosen to focus on? "Yes. I have two girlfriends."

"I have— I'm polyamorous too."

She visibly relaxed. "Oh. Cool."

He grimaced. "I feel like I knew that already…"

"Oh, right, duh. From the— the group chat. Yeah, sorry, my brain has been like Swiss cheese with all the stress lately."

"Don't even worry about it, I'm the same way." Seconds ticked on. "I'm sorry about your family, though."

"Oh, my family is fine. Well, Pa and brother anyway. I don't

care what my mother thinks, though she probably got all smug about it when she heard."

Sid didn't say anything, but something in his face changed when she'd mentioned her mother. Why…?

Oh, no, right… He lost his mother when he was young. She could've slapped herself in the forehead if she wasn't gripping the wheel for dear life. She started to mumble an apology.

"It's okay." The song changed. "But maybe give her a call."

Morgan opened her mouth but thought better before she could put her foot further in.

"For me."

She nodded. "Yeah. Maybe you're right."

Watching her clouded expression from the corner of his eye, he realized he'd massively overstepped and tried to backtrack, insisting that she didn't have to, that it was her business and her business alone.

"No, you're probably right. I… I shouldn't waste the chance."

"The chance to do what?"

She couldn't keep herself from smirking, her fangs showing, lipstick smears and all. "To hear how much of a disappointment I am to her and laugh at her for still putting energy into caring."

Sid laughed, mostly out of relief, but somewhat out of shock.

"But, no, actually… Ugh. I shouldn't take for granted that she's my— my Mommy." Her cheeks reddened as she tried to keep a blank face. "She still means something to me. You're right about that."

Sid looked out the window to hide the tears welling up in his eyes.

"Sorry, man. Let's stop talking about mothers."

"Agreed."

A long, stressful stretch of time went by as Morgan grappled

with highway driving. Sid didn't say anything, just listening to the music and swapping out the CD when it had finished. She didn't seem to notice him doing that, but she drove a lot more calmly while music was playing, so he figured he'd done the right thing.

Once they'd found a less intense part of the drive, Sid broke the silence. "So, we're both polyamorous, we're both trans, we're both… We're both Indigenous, right? What else do we have in common?"

Morgan took a while to respond. "We were both attacked by an animal."

"Yeah."

"A shapeshifting animal that other people don't think is real."

He snorted a laugh. "Try telling that to your therapist."

"Oh, I scored in that department. My therapist is a shapeshifting animal that people don't think is real, too. She's the only reason I understand anything about myself since the changes."

"Wow, lucky. I've had to let doctors explain the scars by themselves before I even imply what happened." He rolled up his sleeve to show the jagged, irregular dark marks on his arm. He covered it just as quickly. "It dragged me under. It's a blessing this was the only damage."

"Yes, it is. That other kelpie saved you, right?"

He nodded once. "But don't think that means I'm some kind of kelpie whisperer."

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Sid, you don't have to be here. I can turn around and drop you off. Just because I'm scared to do this alone doesn't mean you have to be the one to come."

"Nobody else responded."

"It's not your job. You're… You're like, fifteen, aren't you?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, I'm eighteen, so… I'm technically the adult here, so I shouldn't make you do this—"

"You aren't making me do anything. I want to come."

"You're really not acting like you do."

"I'm stressed out, okay? We're driving all the way to some freaky, dangerous swamp on a whim, I barely had time to tell my girlfriend's family what's going on, and we're probably going to have to save some kids from kelpies all on our own. I do not need to tell you why that's so stressful."

She counted her breaths for a few minutes, then said, voice even and sad, "I'm sorry. You're right. I don't think either of us are acting like we n-normally are."

He folded his hands in his lap and stared down at them, face red and pinched. "Yeah. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"It's fine, Sid. Don't worry about it." She exhaled shakily. "This is terrifying."

"Yeah."

"But we can do it, right?"

"Yeah, I think so. If anyone can, it's us." He forced a smile.

She laughed a bit too loudly and a bit too suddenly. "You're right about that."

He rubbed his face with his hands and groaned. "I cannot believe this is what's happening right now."

She gave him a quick, reassuring pat on his shoulder, her hand shooting back to the steering wheel like she was afraid to drive without both hands on it. "We'll be okay. We've been through worse, probably."

He thought of being pulled under. She thought of when her cabinmates caught her transforming.

"Who knows. Let's just get there."

It was 5pm when they finally arrived in Little Croft. They stopped at a Tim Horton's for bagels and coffee, then drove for thirty more minutes to reach the swathes of swamp just south of the tiny town. The sun was going down as they pulled over on the side of the highway.

Standing beside the car, Sid dropped his duffel bag on the ground and crouched down to open it. Morgan watched him pull out a baseball bat and a crowbar, looking at them very firmly as he held one in each hand.

"You're well prepared," Morgan said.

"I'm not a scaredy cat," he said, then his face flushed and he gave her a serious frown. "Which one do you want?"

"The bat, I guess," she said.

He held it out to her, sliding the crowbar back inside.

Her hand hovered over it for a moment, but instead of taking it, she sighed and said, "Actually, it'd be easier if I just… Can you close your eyes for a second?"

He did, and she made sure the road was empty before she quickly undressed and threw the clothes into the back of the van. Then she took a deep, steadying breath, enough to dispel her nerves for only a moment, before her body bent and twisted into the shape of a large, rosy brown wolf.

She nosed his hip to tell him he could look now.

He didn't look as surprised as she had thought he might, and simply said, "I'll put your clothes in the bag, in case you need to change back before we're back at the car."

They walked along the edge of the swamp below the shoulder of the road for a while, slightly out of view of the cars that sped by occasionally. The snow was easy to traverse, not very thick and thankfully not a slushy mess. They could feel the dead tall grasses crunching under their feet. The trees, mostly

skeletonized by winter, sighed in the passive wind. There were only a few pines dotted here and there, well spaced. The two could look deep enough to see large stretches of iced-over water, crossed by muddy lumps of flattened grass, which made viable pathways.

It didn't take long to find a car parked on the shoulder of the road.

"Is that theirs?" Sid asked.

Morgan had never seen their car. She had only spoken to them online. But who else could it belong to? She sniffed around the vehicle to gather information on their smells, and did identify three humans.

The scent trails led them into the brush, so they followed, staying as best as they could out of the water and off the ice, but often having to lope through freezing cold mud. It got dark fast. Sid didn't want to draw attention to them by taking out a flashlight, so he had to rely on Morgan's superior night vision. She let him hold onto her ruff for guidance and support.

It was only moments later that they stumbled across a camera on the ground. They shared a dreadful look, clear even in the darkness. It was mostly undamaged and Sid was able to make it work. He found the last recorded clip and played it for them both to watch:

At the mouth of the swamp, with the afternoon sun in the sky, a blonde girl dressed in a long black jacket and a red dress shirt spoke into a microphone, standing beside a short, brown haired boy in a thin sweater and mustard corduroys. "We are Majora Addams and Barney Hucksworth, and today we are investigating at the site of the disappearance of Toronto residents Samuel and Adrienne Bane. The couple tragically went missing while hunting illegally in this swamp behind me

just a few weeks ago, right before Christmas."

Behind them, there was a flash of black, and the person holding the camera said, "What was that?"

Both Majora and Barney turned around. The three of them slowly crossed the treeline and struggled through the mud. The black shape stayed just ahead of them, never quite in focus.

Barney said, "My God, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," and the camera panned to the ground.

"Barney, don't get so close, it's a wild animal," Majora's voice pleaded faintly.

"There are no wild horses in Ontario. It's probably just lost." He laughed softly as she said something else, and then, "I think it wants me to ride it."

Seconds later, Majora screamed and said, "Jorge, cut the camera," as the ground rushed up.

The last thing picked up was Barney's laughter fading into the distance.

Morgan and Sid looked at each other in horror. Sid lowered the camera. In the near distance, a group of coyotes cackled, making both of them jump.

"We need to focus," Sid said, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. "I don't want to be out here longer than we have to be."

Morgan shook out her coat to ground herself. She focused on finding the scent trails, and… Yes, there it was. The kelpie. She huffed to let Sid know. She started off in the direction that the new scent led her, slow and careful. He made sure his steps were light and sound, and kept an eye on his compass.

As slow as their movements, the landscape had started to change. The temperature started to rise, the snow and ice gave way to greener and greener foliage and flowing water that became less intolerable on Morgan's paws.

"My compass is being weird," Sid said, watching it spin.

They both knew what that meant. They didn't need to be told, though. The swamp itself had whispered it clearly: they weren't in the Ontario they knew anymore.

The greenery grew tighter packed and lush. Most of the trees were thick and ancient, their gnarled bark ribbed with lichen and dotted with shelf mushrooms. Large roots arched out of the rich, fragrant earth, twisting in loops draped with moss. Frogs croaked, insects whirred, birds called. Sid could have been wrong, but he thought he heard a low, mournful keen.

The call of a kelpie.

But Morgan didn't react, so he tried to push it from his mind.

Unfortunately, it wasn't much further until Morgan stopped, whining, and turned in a circle. She nipped at the duffel bag. Sid dropped it for her and covered his eyes.

When she had changed back, she told him she'd lost the scent, wiping her dirty hands on her pants. They buckled down and looked around for a while.

Morgan stopped dead in front of a massive aboveground root. She raised her arm. "Majora Addams?"

The blonde girl from the video stared back at them, terrified, from under the root. Panicked recognition filled her face. "My God, Morgan, is that you? What is going on?"

Morgan tried not to let herself be distracted by how surprising it was that Majora recognized her. They'd only voice called once. "We found your camera. We saw the video. Tell us what happened."

Majora pulled herself to her feet shakily, wiping tears from her face, smearing dirt onto her skin. "Barney— I guess you'd know him as thedinosaur," she coughed out a laugh, but her face was pained, "he got on this— this random horse. A big black

thing. It took off but he was— he was stuck to it? His arms and legs were," she pressed her palms together hard, "not even just stuck to it, but fused with it, and he was laughing but—" she suddenly dissolved into sobs for a moment and Morgan put her arms around her. Eventually she was able to say, "Barney's dead, Morgan. The horse went under the water."

Sid covered his mouth. His heart pounded in his head.

"We will get you out of here," Morgan said firmly, holding Majora away from her with both hands on her shoulders. "Where's Jorge?"

"I have no idea. We lost track of each other when the swamp," she gestured at their surroundings, "got like this."

Morgan looked around, feeling the muscles in the back of her head twitch like she wanted to move her ears, feeling her nose burn as it took in less scents than she needed it to. She suppressed a canine whine.

Sid seemed to know what she was stressed about. "Can you call Jorge?" he asked Majora.

She listlessly dug her phone out of her pocket and didn't react when it didn't turn on. "I guess it got full of water."

Sid was quick to take his out. "What's his number?"

Her eyes were blank and she took a long time to respond. "I don't know their number. I… Do you have Discord? I know… They're twisted992#9927."

Sid's eyebrows went up. "Oh. Yeah. I'm in a server with them."

Majora didn't react as Sid messed around on his phone.

Morgan's eyes lit up. "I hear it," she said, and took off, holding Majora's hand.

The three made more noise than they should have, but it was hard to keep Majora in the zone. The swamp threw them this

way and that as deep stretches of water, impenetrable walls of ferns and brambles, and massive ancient trees cropped up in their path. Morgan was sound, though, and took them to the source of the ringing that soon grew loud enough for those without supernaturally good hearing to notice: Jorge's phone, sitting on a rock in a small clearing. Nobody was in sight, human nor kelpie.

"There!" Majora shouted at a whisper, pointing.

Under some nearby foliage, Jorge was there. Their jacket was torn to shreds, revealing their bleeding arms. Their short black hair was full of twigs and shreds of green, and their eyes were huge, wild, staring at them from where they were pressed to the ground. They moved a hand to their mouth, shushing, and pointed.

Majora, Morgan, and Sid turned around.

The black kelpie stood before them: a tall, lean, muscular horse, its coat shimmering with rivulets of water, its long and tangled mane plastered to its crested neck, its dark eyes fixed on its prey. Its nostrils flared, steaming out hot breath, and it stomped one hoof. Its mouth began to open and did not stop opening, splitting its large and delicate head, like something between a crocodilian and canine mouth. Its teeth were shining bone yellow in dark red gums, shreds of flesh and blood still remaining, glinting in the pale moonlight that dared reach it. All around them, crickets sang as a low, hungry keen flowed from the kelpie's eager throat.

Sid stepped forward, fingers to his mouth as he whistled a perfect response. The rest happened fast: its ears pricked up and its eyes focused on Sid— Morgan unzipped the duffel bag and took out the crowbar— the kelpie's front hooves kicked up moss as it lunged, Sid stepping sideways to send the wide jaws

straight to Morgan— who shoved the crowbar into its mouth, wedging it open, and screamed for everyone to run.

The kelpie roared as it reared up, pawing at its face frantically with its hooves, mulch flying everywhere. Jorge exploded out of the undergrowth and Majora grabbed their arm and the three ran after Sid in a line, just straight, just as far as possible as they could get from the panicked whinnying and howling. Leaves and branches whipped at their faces and clawed at their hair and clothes and suddenly, in what felt like only a matter of seconds, the four teenagers tumbled on top of each other and fell face first into the snow.

A transport truck drove by, spraying silt and slush on top of them.

Jorge scrambled to their feet, kicking snow and sliding, and tried to dash across the road. It took both Morgan and Sid to grab them and calm them down, telling them over and over that they're safe, they're safe, it's not going to find them here. They sobbed their throat raw, clinging to Morgan and shaking uncontrollably.

Majora sat on the shoulder of the road, holding her legs to her body, staring. "Barney's still in there," she said, but her voice had nothing in it, and she didn't try to move.

They weren't all entirely sure how, but they made it back to Cherry's VW bus in one piece, more or less. The two students climbed listlessly into the back and passed out on the plush bench seats. Morgan took a blanket out from the storage under the seats and tucked them in, hoping she could convince Cherry's parents to pay to have the car cleaned. The thought seemed so far away, so domestic, that it almost made her laugh.

Sid sat quietly in the passenger seat, looking down at his lap, as Morgan drove. The sun had long since gone down, and the

stars in the mostly clear sky were beautiful. A few scrappy dark clouds obscured the moon. Sid eventually nodded off. Morgan hoped, her eyes fixed on the road ahead, that none of her sleeping passengers were having nightmares worse than what they'd just lived through.

Puppy Playdate

Even though the ground was still wet and covered in snow, Morgan was down in the slushy mud of the dog park run, playing with three adorable puppies. Leo, the excitable young golden retriever, kept jumping on her back and trying to knock her over, while Buster and Bruiser, the tiny poodle mix brothers, ran around her, barking. Sitting nearby, Ram and Keshaun chatted with Cherry and Journee, bundled up to their ears. It was a cold, dark February afternoon, and a light wind was blowing, smelling like snow to come.

Ram had just gotten back from visiting her family for the winter— she'd taken an extra long vacation because she wasn't in school or working for the time being. She'd paused her Etsy business making skirts and dresses because it was getting overwhelming, and wanted to spend time with her family while trying to reset herself before getting a job at an art store or something.

Keshaun had recently moved into a new, smaller apartment, because his last landlord was not impressed that he came home with two dogs. "I didn't feel safe around him or on the property anymore," Keshaun was saying, dead serious, "not when he's got a key to my place. You should've seen the way he looks at my boys, no bullshit."

"Maybe because you called them Buster and Bruiser when they're little purse dogs," Journee laughed.

"Hey, you gotta respect them," he said, but he was laughing, too.

"It was my idea, actually," Ram admitted, covering her smile with her mittened hand. "I think it's adorable."

"It is!" Cherry said, leaning down to pet Bruiser, the darker of the two dogs, as he pelted over.

"Where you working now, Journee?" Keshaun asked.

"I'm still at The Vine," she clarified, "just reduced hours. I'm picking up shifts for my cousin at the Farm Boy her dad manages. She broke her arm falling on the ice."

"Oh shit," he said.

"I hope she recovers soon," Cherry said, worried. "It must suck so much to break a bone."

"You never did?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't know that," Morgan piped up, then froze, facing Leo in a play bow, when everyone turned to look at her.

Cherry couldn't help but giggle, and so did Journee as she said, "I should've brought a leash to take you home on!"

She sat back normally and covered her face. "You're embarrassing me," she whined, but she was practically wagging her tail.

Leo jumped on her and knocked her over, and everyone laughed.

It wasn't long before Journee's boyfriend, Parker, showed up. He was Leo's real owner, but Journee always took him for walks while Parker was at work. He worked at a weed store nearby, and lived only a few blocks away. Journee still lived with her parents back in her and Cherry's old neighborhood, so it was a

big deal for her to be down here right now. Parker knew and thanked her with a box of chocolates.

"Aww, babe," she fawned, leaping up from the bench and running to meet him. "It's not even Valentine's anymore and you're still spoiling me."

He grinned shyly and Morgan was surprised by how long his canines were. She thought it was weird of her to think that and pointedly looked away, even though she itched badly to figure him out. She'd met Journee before a couple of times, but Parker was brand new. They'd only started dating at the end of last year, and he hadn't gone to high school with them.

She listened, not facing them, feeling her ears point backwards as they all said their hellos. She stopped playing with the dogs and looked their way when Cherry called her over to say hi too.

She stood up, suddenly very aware of how covered in mud and snow she was, and awkwardly waved at him. "Hi. I'm Morgan."

"Hey," he said, grinning again. He had an easygoing look about him, his eyes pleasantly crinkled, though he looked like he could fall asleep anywhere. His shaggy, dirty blond hair fell out from under his brown beanie, and he was the lightest dressed of the bunch in a red flannel, jeans, and work boots. "I'm Parker. Nice to finally meet you."

"Finally?" she barked, failing at not sounding shocked.

"I talk about you all the time!" Journee said. "Sorry! I just love that Cherry has such wonderful girls taking such good care of her. She's an angel, she deserves it."

"Morgan and Laurie are my angels," Cherry said, blowing a kiss to Morgan.

Morgan caught it and she giggled.

"I wish Laurie could be here," Journee said with a sigh, "she'd love you, Parker. But she's stuck picking up my shifts!"

"We should get home for dinner, shouldn't we, sweetie?" Ram asked Keshaun, putting her hand on his arm.

"Yes baby," he said, kissing her on the cheek. "Your leftovers are still in my fridge from last night, so you don't have to cook. And I'll reheat it, don't you worry baby."

She giggled and covered her face with her hands again. "You're too much."

"Never," he said, getting up and pulling her to her feet. He kissed her again before calling his dogs over and clipping their leashes back on.

Leo bounded over too, trying to get in the way, but Parker got control of him with a bark. He immediately flushed like a tomato and laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I got him trained weird."

Morgan's heart sped up, but she tried to ignore it still. She was probably looking into it too much. Looking for what she wanted to see, not what was really there.

Parker kept giving her these looks, though, and as their goodbyes to Ram and Keshaun stretched into another half hour of conversation, he'd purposefully find the things Morgan thought were funny so she'd laugh. She didn't notice it at first, but he was staring at her when she did.

Self conscious, she told Cherry it was probably time for them to go home, too. "Laurie will be waiting for us."

They all said goodbye for real now. When Cherry and Morgan were a few blocks away, she asked her if she'd noticed that Parker had fangs.

Cherry had.

"You don't think he's…?"

"Do you think so? You're the expert."

She laughed. "No, Ripley's the expert. I just live here."

"Why don't we give him a call?"

"Wait," Morgan shook her head, "if we're gonna ask anyone, shouldn't it be Journee? She'd… She might know. I mean, I couldn't have just not told you two."

"How am I supposed to ask her that? Oh hey Journee, do you think your new boyfriend is a werewolf?"

Morgan laughed. "I don't see any better way, unfortunately."

Cherry said she'd think about it.

They got home and made a quick dinner of canned chili and biscuits from a package, curling up on the couch with Laurie to watch *What Dreams May Come*, a DVD from Morgan's collection. It always made Laurie cry, but she was always the one who asked for it.

About halfway through the movie, Cherry got a text. She absentmindedly opened her phone to check it, then laughed out loud and said, "Morgan, you'll never guess what Journee just texted me!"

"What?"

"Parker's a werewolf!"

Morgan and Laurie both exclaimed, "What?!"

They tripped over themselves to explain to Laurie what they'd both noticed at the dog park, and agreed enthusiastically to tell Journee about Morgan. Apparently, Journee had known this about her boyfriend for weeks. After Parker had noticed some things about Morgan himself, they were taking a chance and telling Cherry.

The two werewolves excitedly exchanged numbers and Parker called her on the spot. They launched into a rapidfire conversation about how long they'd been werewolves, how they

got bit, who knew, and where they went to shift.

"I don't get to shift very much anymore, honestly," Morgan said, "not since leaving my old place in the suburbs. Out there, I'd go hang out in the little patch of woods not far from my house, but there's nothing like that downtown."

Parker told her about the funny hack Journee and him had, as he called it. "We just go to the dog park! She puts a collar and leash on me and we go with Leo after dark. You should totally come with!"

"L-like, now?" Morgan stuttered. She was so over the moon about making a new werewolf friend— a first werewolf friend, really— but she didn't think she was ready to shift out in public.

"Sure, we were gonna head to the park in an hour or two anyway. It'll be so much fun, I promise!"

"But what about our neighbors? We don't have a dog," Morgan protested, even though the idea was so tantalizing it was making her teeth ache.

"You can come back to my place to change. My neighbors don't give a shit."

Morgan looked to her girlfriends for permission, and both of them nodded, big smiles on their faces.

"O-okay, we'll do it," she said.

They finished their movie, though Morgan could hardly sit still from anticipation. She kept getting up and pacing, grabbing snacks from the kitchen. When they were finally ready to go, she had to purposefully slow herself down so she wasn't speeding ahead of her girlfriends.

"What are the chances!" Cherry kept saying to Laurie, flapping her hands in excitement. "Journee and I have been friends for years, and somehow both of us are dating a werewolf."

"How many more do you think are out there?" Laurie

whispered back, watching Morgan with a smile on her face.

"I have no idea," she replied. "We should try to find out, though. For Morgan's sake."

Stepping out of Parker's house, shifted, beside another shifted werewolf, was an unreal experience. They looked like they could have been siblings, too: he was her size, his shaggy coat a dirty blond like his hair, his eyes golden brown. They did their best to not pull at their leashes, walking politely by Journee and Cherry's sides until they were unleashed at the dog park.

The pair sped off together, chasing each other and leaping at each other, tails wagging. It was the happiest Laurie and Cherry had seen Morgan in weeks, and Journee had never seen Parker so energetic, not even when he played with Leo. The three girls laughed joyously, watching their partners playing like puppies in the softly falling snow.

Isolation

COVID hit us all hard. For me, it came in waves.

It was March Break when it hit— at least it was for me; Laurie and Cherry had already graduated. Cherry was being put on the path to managing the second location of the restaurant her family owned, and Laurie was blooming at her job at the comic book shop with her friends Adi, Journee, and Arlow. I was doing well enough in most of my classes, carrying the last stretch of senior year without totally giving up and flunking out. I badly wanted to reapply to the Toronto Film School next year, or maybe the year after, once I'd gotten a break and could medically transition. I was this close to getting on estrogen. I'd put all my eggs in that basket, hoping that somehow becoming a new girl with real girl hormones in my body would make it less of a catastrophic failure to apply to the school of my dreams on the second go. Maybe that girl would actually get in, or at least not retreat into a depression nest when the rejection letter came in.

Even though I'd quit therapy when COVID hit because talking about any of these problems, even with Suzanne, made me feel nauseous, everything was going okay.

At first, it was just us three, plus Cherry's family, since she had to be around them at work, at the main location. Even though

the doors were shut to customers, they took online orders and made extra for families in the area who couldn't afford— or couldn't find, with how much people were hoarding— food anymore. I stopped being able to volunteer, even if the clinic wasn't ghosting me after my mental health break, and Laurie couldn't work, but the government sent me and her some money, so it wasn't so bad. At least in terms of finances.

In every other area, though? Things sucked. If it weren't for my school automatically letting us pass our current classes, I would have dropped out.

I know the whole world stopped, but it felt like everyone but me was at least making something out of all the time suddenly on their hands. Laurie took up crocheting, and even though she only made granny squares, she managed to sell some of them online. Cherry got into weird abstract art and incorporated some of Laurie's squares into a really cool piece, where she did an acrylic pour over a piece of wood she found on the side of the road, and then nailed three of the granny squares to it. She worked at it fervently, carving leaf and stem designs into the acrylic layer, adding and removing details until she felt it was perfect. Then she hung it in the living room and didn't make art again all month.

Me, though? I didn't do anything. I just sat there, rotting.

I couldn't bring myself to work on any of my film ideas, or the scripts I had been writing. I could hardly even sit through a whole movie. I just sort of vanished from school instead of getting to graduate and go to prom like I should have. I couldn't see any of the few friends I had. I missed out on starting estrogen because I was too scared to set foot in any medical office. I couldn't volunteer, let alone get a job.

I couldn't do anything.

That's when the next wave hit.

I was watching Laurie crochet in the living room. I was perched on the arm of the sofa and she was sitting across from me, watching *Night at the Museum* while she worked. The way her fingers moved, the precision and timing. The control of her muscles, even the small ones you don't think about. It was impressive, but that wasn't what I was feeling. Was I… Jealous? That's what it felt like, at least. Why couldn't I move my body with such grace, why couldn't I—

"What does it feel like?" I blurted the question, leaning forward and jiggling my leg. "Crocheting, I mean."

"Oh, this? I don't know, I don't really think about it."

I could feel my muscles sliding over tendons and bones. I could feel each tooth in my head, aching. I could almost feel the crunch of—

Oh, so that's what this feeling was.

That was along major loss I'd suffered because of COVID. I'd been able to play with Parker in the dog park for the past couple weeks, almost every night, but now… Now we couldn't even see each other as humans. After spending so long not shifting, I thought I'd gotten used to not being able to be myself when I wanted to. But I guess after that taste of freedom, my body, the wolf's body inside of me, wanted more.

I grabbed my glass of water off the table and forced myself to swallow it all, the muscles of my throat working, powerful, begging for more power. I didn't know what to do. I went upstairs and put on movie after movie and burned in front of the screen until it got dark around me, and then I went to bed.

I woke up in the middle of the night starving. I slipped out of bed, grateful to have chosen to sleep on the edge of our connected beds tonight instead of between Cherry and Laurie.

I stood in the darkness by the door for a moment, looking back at them. I loved them so much. I really did.

I fought a shudder and crept down to the kitchen. There, I opened the fridge and stood naked, bathed in the cold and the light and the cold and the smells and the cold, feeling too little, wanting too much.

The next couple days, I was changing. We went on like we had been, in this new normal, ordering groceries to be delivered to our door and dropped like a package, doing nothing all day, taking walks where we cross the street to avoid even our friends and neighbors. This new— well, resurrected— longing in me had shown me that I didn't really mind the new normal. It wasn't the worst thing in the world to stay home alone with my girlfriends, and since I wore a mask anytime I left the house, I didn't have to be so diligent about shaving, which sorta helped the disappointment of being too scared to start hormones now. I supposed I could even get back into watching things if I tried to pay attention to what Laurie put on while she was crocheting, and it was always nice to hear about what Cherry got up to as she was making food for the community.

Alone in my head, though, all I wanted was to get out of my body.

It was almost May when the waves got rougher.

I kept waking up hungrier than hungry. I kept finding myself in the kitchen, sometimes more literally than not, salivating as I stared into the glow of the fridge. I couldn't get it out of my head: the scents, the tastes, the textures of tearing flesh and crunching bones and flowing blood and—

I swallowed the growl rising in my throat even as I was just sitting there watching Laurie crochet.

The thought crossed my mind, catching me off guard, that

they wouldn't even notice if I was gone. I didn't contribute anything to this household, aside from the extra income, but all I had to do was be alive and out of a job to get that. I did chores sometimes, yeah, but with one less person to dirty dishes and generate trash, they wouldn't need my help. I didn't even hang out with them. Sitting here watching Laurie wasn't hanging out. It was pure observation. I was trapped in my body, observing my life from afar.

I couldn't get any of it out of my head.

I didn't last much longer than that. The waves crashed over me, taking me with them.

One early morning, I slipped out with a note saying I was off for a walk. At first, I was, but my body knew better. I found myself on the first bus to my old neighborhood, bent over in my seat, leg jiggling.

I got off at the gas station. I passed under the bright lights, the reek of gasoline filling my nose and sending me spinning. I lengthened my stride and set my jaw. I prowled my way through my old neighborhood, past the garbage bins, past my old house. I suppressed a shudder and pressed on, following my old path to the woods. Picking up speed, I burst into the cool, lush forest and took a deep, soothing breath.

I found my rock, where I used to stash my stuff when I'd hide out here overnight. I shed my clothes with unnervingly still hands, burying them gently in the bag I'd brought, proof I'd known what I was doing all along. I made sure my phone was safely in a waterproof case. I debated turning it off, but opted to keep it on. It's not like I never wanted to be found, I just had to get away for a little while. Then, easy as that, I changed.

I was gone for three days.

There weren't any kids wandering in the woods, only the

very occasional dog walker or smoker. I knew this place, so avoiding them was second nature, my brown coat blending into the background. I watched them from a safe distance. The way their bodies moved… I couldn't imagine mine moving in the same way. I was better like this. Stronger, faster. More myself. This was the way it had to be.

I turned and swept away to the other side of the small forest.

I don't know what pulled me out of it first, the smell of Laurie's cologne and Cherry's lotion or the sounds of their voices calling my name. I found myself going against the instincts that had taken over, trotting towards them, ears up, eyes bright. It smelled like, it sounded like… Like home. Like where I was supposed to be.

"Are you sure she's here?" came Laurie's fearful voice.

"I don't know where else she'd go," Cherry murmured in response, deeply worried. She sniffled. "I don't want to get the police involved… I'm sure she's not human right now."

"But what if she is, Cherry? What if someone—" a sob cut her off.

My head spun with what she must mean, but something had rooted me to the spot, keeping me in silence. I listened to them leave. My heart breaking was distant, under flesh and muscle and blood and fur and the feeling of it all in my powerful jaws.

It didn't take too long for me to hear their voices again, though. This time, there was someone else with them. Someone even more familiar…

"Thank you so much for coming," Laurie was saying, ragged, as though she'd been crying a lot.

"Don't even mention it," came the new voice, serious and young and masculine. "If I hadn't only just gotten out of quarantine I'd have been here three days ago."

"I'm so sorry about that, by the way," Cherry said. She was walking ahead of the group, coming up the rise. I could see her now from where I was hiding in the brush. "Is your dad okay?"

"Oh, Pa's fine. It was a false alarm."

Wait, Pa? Wait, is that Trace?

My little brother bounded easily up the hill, looking around. His sandy hair was down to his neck, longer than it had been when I last saw him, and he was taller now too, as if that made any sense. He was wearing a mask and clothes I'd never seen before, but it was him, of course it was him. And he was holding my clothes and my phone… I remembered showing him where I buried my things, after I told him. He remembered. He knew.

I stepped out from the bushes just as Laurie came up behind them. We all froze in our tracks.

"Morgan," Trace's voice cracked, "what are you doing?"

I didn't have to think about it. I just changed. I stumbled, my legs not used to being bipedal anymore.

Cherry and Laurie both rushed to hold me up as Trace tossed my clothes at me. I struggled into the skirt and light jacket with Cherry's help. She was tender and patient, brushing my hair out of my face and keeping me steady. Laurie rubbed comforting circles into my back, whispering encouragement. I could hardly think about what was going on. I just knew I was supposed to feel bad, because I knew they all did.

I'd scared them so badly. Why couldn't I feel it?

Once I was decent, Trace stomped up to me and threw his arms around me.

"I didn't know you were quarantining," I croaked, hugging him back awkwardly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it was just a scare at Pa's work."

"I can't believe you ran away," Laurie cried, shaking as her

strength was sapped away into terrified relief. She looked awful, nowhere near the girl I knew, in sweatpants and her stained high school shirt.

There was the pain. There was the grief. There was the shame for what I had done.

"She's going through a lot, clearly," Trace said defensively, turning to look at her but keeping his arm over my shoulders.

"It's okay," I said, clearing my throat and swallowing. "It's okay. I can speak for myself."

He gave me a long look and then said, "I'm gonna get home, but I'll call you later, okay?"

I nodded, and then he walked away.

Laurie reached out to touch my arm and I leaned into it, opening my arms to Cherry. She slumped into my embrace and I held her tight, Laurie hugging us both. Cherry broke down sobbing. I pulled her closer, shaking, and started to cry too.

It was only on the drive back that I was able to talk about what happened. I'd kinda only just figured it out myself. "I'm sorry I ran away," I whispered, afraid to break the silence in the car, but knowing I needed to. "I… I've been lost."

In the front seat, Cherry's fingers tightened around the steering wheel and she frowned.

I tried to explain how I hadn't felt like myself for so long. All those nights where I'd stay up pacing, longing for something. When I finally realized what it was that I'd been wanting, it had locked me out of my body, of my life. How I had almost been trapped by the wolf. How even now, sitting in the car, filthy and with a stomach full of squirrels and rabbits, I couldn't get myself to stay in the world around me. I couldn't convince myself that any of this was happening. I wasn't sure how much of it was COVID's fault, but the isolation sure didn't help. "I… I

think I needed this," I concluded shakily, staring down at my hands, a thousand miles away. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't want to. I hate that I scared you."

Cherry suddenly pulled into a parking lot. She got out of the driver's seat and climbed into the back with me and Laurie. She threw her arms around me, burying her face in my neck. I could feel her tears on my skin. "Please don't ever do that again."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not mad at you. I don't blame you," she murmured, her breath warm. "I know you… But please, next time, just talk to us. We're here for you, Morgan. We love you."

Laurie grabbed my arm on my other side and tucked herself under it, laying her head on my chest. "We were really scared, Morgan. Until Trace found your things, we thought someone had…"

"It's okay," I spoke louder over her voice. I didn't want to hear it and I didn't want either of them to have to, too. "I'm okay. I'm here now. And I won't do this again." I took a shaky breath. "I'm s-sorry. I need help. I don't want to lose control again."

"What if you texted Suzanne?" Cherry suggested. "I'm sure she'd be able to help you."

I opened my mouth and closed it again, not wanting to admit she was right.

"It's her job to help you! She's your therapist," Laurie said, squeezing me a little too hard. "You can't do all this on your own, sweetheart. You don't deserve to carry all this by yourself. Look how much danger it put you in. It's not good for you to try to handle all this alone."

"You have a support network," Cherry agreed, leaning back to look me in the eyes, loving and gentle. "You're allowed to

rely on people."

"I… I guess so," I said, my voice wavering. "I just don't—I… No. You're right. I… I need help. I can't do this alone. I don't want to… To scare you again. I need to go to therapy again." I swallowed with some difficultly and added, "Maybe I could start… I could shift at home, too. If that's okay."

"Of course that's okay," Cherry said. "Anything to make you comfortable, sweetheart."

Laurie nodded. "We should've offered that a long time ago… I just didn't know—"

"No, no, it's okay. I should've said something… I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You told us now. I love you so much, Morgan," Laurie said, breathing deeply so her voice would steady. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"I love you so much too," Cherry said, curling back up against me.

"I love you both too," I whispered into her hair. "So, so much. Thank you."

That evening, I sent a text to Suzanne asking to start therapy again and explaining what had happened. It felt like a weight had lifted off my shoulders when she responded, telling me we can start on Monday.

I helped Cherry make dinner that night, filled with a new hope. Since giving up art for the time being, she'd gotten really into saving vegan recipes on Pinterest, and figured now was the best time to try them out. I loved hearing her talk about it. I loved more being a part of it. I loved being here, with my girlfriends, the best people in the world. I loved being back in our life, out of isolation.

Eating together on lawn chairs out front, we watched squirrels and birds and rabbits wander freely on the empty street.

It felt strange seeing the world so hidden and on pause, but in that moment, I was certain everything would be alright.

The Snow Ball

On the evening of the 27th of June, Ronnie and Barclay sat outside of Ronnie's house, waiting for the bus that would take them to the dance and dinner being held on the grounds of Shimmering Lake Summer Camp. Even though COVID had shut everything down and kept everyone in virtual school since March, forcing the boyfriends to only socialize with each other's households, their families had been convinced— with the help of a little magic— that it was okay for them to go to this dance. Silent Woods, ever a safe haven, had remained free of the virus. It was the perfect opportunity for them to get out of this new stressful and isolating routine, and to give the campers who were still in high school a dance they'd miss otherwise.

Ronnie rested his head on Barclay's shoulder, trying hard not to feel self conscious in the long, form fitting blue dress he wore. He could hardly believe he was getting to go to what basically felt like prom with Barclay, but getting to dress up fancy and beautiful like this was making his heart run a mile a minute. When he'd picked out the dress and put it on, deep down a part of him had admitted to himself that he'd wanted this for years. If he'd been going to prom with his classmates, though, he would have preferred eating a plate of thumb tacks than show up looking like this.

Barclay put his arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer. He looked gorgeous in a silky dress shirt in wine red, with deep blue roses to match Ronnie's dress. His dress pants also matched, and he got a pair of dress shoes in the same red.

"You're absolutely stunning," Ronnie murmured, leaning away to look at him.

Barclay blushed and rolled his eyes. "You're even more stunning," he said.

Ronnie reached over and ruffled his curly hair. He pulled the boy into a warm kiss.

When the bus pulled up, they were greeted by Jason, who wore a red plaid jacket, hunting camo pants, and work boots. He asked how they'd been; it had been years since they'd seen each other.

"Oh, about as well as you'd expect," Ronnie said with a shrug. "COVID sucks."

Abigail and Ripley said hello to them when they got on; they were sitting together close to the back of the bus. Abigail wore a yellow chiffon halter dress embroidered with red flowers, and she'd braided her hair. She also had on a cowboy hat and boots. Ripley, as usual, wore a big green shirt with his cargo shorts and jean vest, both covered in various patches and pins. They chatted about how life had been for Abigail, isolated on the farm.

"It's honestly not that bad. We're close enough to the Woods that nobody's gotten sick. We took on more livestock recently because a neighbor retired and couldn't keep her chickens. We've been sending extra eggs and meat to neighbors and folks in other towns who can't shop for themselves."

Soon, the bus stopped and let on Cherry, Morgan, and Laurie. Laurie was in her favorite champagne suit with a blue shirt and

gold tie. Morgan had on her favorite skirt, which Abigail made, and a pink ruffled blouse. Cherry ran to see Ronnie right away; he complimented her green, pink, and blue tie dye two piece dress, and her jean jacket covered in cherry patches, matching her cherry earrings.

"Thank you! Morgan got me this for Christmas," she said, spinning around to show the back: a full tie dye patch.

Morgan and Cherry chose the seat across from Ronnie and Barclay, with Laurie sitting behind them. They talked as the bus went on to the next house. It had been months since they'd seen each other in person and they were all overjoyed to be here.

The next person who was picked up was a bit of a stranger. They stepped on slowly, in a galaxy pattern sundress that fell all the way down to their purple platform boots, giving them an extra few inches on top of their already above average height. Their hair was long and dyed the same purple, set over their shoulders, and they had lots of freckles. They, unlike everyone else on the bus, still wore a mask, and looked extremely alarmed when they saw nobody else was wearing one.

Jason introduced them as Nebula. "They're new to us, yes, but they're Gwen's partner. Which, Shebal and I have decided, means they can be trusted," he said with a warm smile.

Nebula shot him a wicked side eye.

"Nebula, why don't you go sit back there with Abigail and Ripley?"

"Yes! We have so much to tell you!" Ripley said.

They looked a little apprehensive, but did as they were asked.

During the long drive into the country, Ripley and Abigail filled them in on what Silent Woods was, and where they were going. Ripley showed them his book, complete with real

photographs from his adventures, and Abigail showed photos that Hafsa had sent in the campers' group chat, as well as some from her farm. They relaxed, and eventually, they did take their mask off too.

The next stop was Sid and Genette's house. Everyone but Jason was surprised to not only see them, but three other teenagers waiting outside.

Sid and Genette stepped on first. Sid looked around shyly, embarrassed to be dressed so nicely in front of people who he'd barely met, and sat down as soon as he could. He wore a silver and purple suit vest over a white dress shirt, a nice pair of pressed white pants, and purple shoes.

His sister, though, was much more confident, waving to everyone with a grin. She had to be careful as she sat beside Sid, as she was wearing a black gothic dress with a very large ruffled skirt.

Sid asked her for the thousandth time since she'd bought it if the corset was really comfortable to wear.

"It's not that bad," she reassured him, fluffing out her hair so it lay across her bare shoulders, then sorting out the sleeves, making sure she looked perfect, even though her girlfriend wouldn't be picked up for quite a while yet.

Next to step on was a girl a bit older than Sid, who looked a lot like him, wearing a simple white dress shirt and black pants. She had the same black hair and round face, but her hair had grown out to her chin. She was a little taller, too, and less fat but more stocky. She looked at the others in surprise, her hands flat against her hips, completely unsure of what to do with herself.

"More new people?" Ripley asked.

Jason laughed lightheartedly. "Yes, this is Mary, one of Sid's cousins." He beckoned the other two to step up into the bus.

"This is Daisy-Anne, and this is Ben."

The second girl was shorter and fatter than Mary, like Sid. She wore a yellow and green floral dress shirt, a meshy green skirt with a solid slip, and long socks. She was just as confident as Genette, saying hello to everyone as she walked to sit across from her cousins.

"Wait," Abigail called. "How about you three come sit with us? We'll explain some things to you."

"Things about Silent Woods?" Daisy-Anne asked.

Mary whacked her shoulder lightly.

Ripley's eyes lit up. "You know?"

"Only what Sid said by accident," Mary said, feeling just as anxious as she did while doing a presentation at school.

Ben sauntered past them. He was dressed the most casual, in a green t shirt layered over a pink and black striped long sleeved shirt, and a pair of black shorts. "Let's just go sit with them," he said. "Do you not want to hear about magic all of a sudden?"

"No!" Daisy-Anne said, jumping up and following him down the aisle, leaving Mary with no choice.

Daisy-Anne sat beside Nebula, so Mary and Ben sat together.

Abigail asked, "You don't always live with Sid and Genette, do you?"

Mary shook her head.

"I thought so. I remembered him mentioning something about his relatives coming to see him from up north."

"That's us," Daisy-Anne said. "We came down in February during PD week, but we had permission to stay until March break was over for Sid, and then we went into lockdown, so we've been here for ages."

"We've had online school," Mary added. "It's not that bad.

We're used to a crowded house, too."

"It is that bad," Ben sighed loudly. "I don't like online school. It's so hard."

Mary tried to ruffle his hair, but he dodged away from her. "Your grades don't matter, at least."

Genette looked out the window, worried, as they drove away. "Are we going to get there in time? It's already so late," she asked Jason as he took a seat.

"Look again," he said.

She did, and gasped. They were pulling up to Ava's house. She checked her phone, and no time had passed at all.

"What just happened?"

"We needed to be somewhere, so we got there." He got up to let Henry, Gwen, and Ava onto the bus.

"Wow," Ben whispered, eyes sparkling with wonder. He turned to Ripley and said, "This place is seriously magic, isn't it?"

"You have no idea," he said, grinning from ear to ear.

Henry stepped on, looking familiar to those who knew him in his Canadian tuxedo and black polo shirt. He didn't wave much, feeling quite self conscious as he tried to not think about the place he'd been mentally when he last stepped foot on this bus.

Gwen came up behind him, giving him a reassuring nudge, before seeing Sid and running to him. Nebula, too, got up and came to see her. They both praised her outfit choice, a green and pink pastel tutu with a deep yellow button down and blue vest.

Genette stood so they could sit together, with Nebula in front leaning over the back of the seat so they could all talk.

Ava stepped onto the bus last. Genette thought she looked

absolutely perfect in a green shirt covered in vibrant fish, tucked into her mustard corduroys. She even had the fish hat she'd thought was so funny when she first saw it, the day they went to Pride together. She swept her into a hug before taking a new seat with her.

Just as soon as they'd started driving, they stopped again, wheels crunching as they slowed down in the gravelly parking lot by the bridge to the island. Gwen and Sid hurried off first, with Nebula cautiously tailing them; Hafsa had run across the bridge to meet them and they were so excited to see her.

Gwen met her and grabbed both her hands, locking their fingers together and grinning. "You look so good!"

She wore silky blue pants that flowed around her legs, a gauzy blue top that went to her knees layered over a black long sleeve shirt, and a close-fitting black hijab. "You do too, both of you!" she said. She hugged them both, giving Sid a kiss on the cheek, then looked past them at Nebula. "Hi, it's good to see you again."

They smiled and returned the greeting, but they weren't really paying attention to Hafsa. Dozens of fireflies had gathered around them, landing on their sundress to alight each star, gracing their freckles, and collecting in their hair. They glowed, inside and out, as Gwen walked up to them. The fireflies began to gather in her clothes too. Nebula took her hand and twirled her, causing the fireflies to scatter away from them both. They laughed in excitement.

To the side, Abigail lifted the skirt of her dress and curtseyed.

"That was you?" Daisy-Anne asked.

"Ripley told you I can talk to animals, didn't he?"

Ripley bounced on his toes. "Yes I did!"

Everyone began to cross the long bridge. While it was still old, creaky, and a little slippery, it had been decorated finely

with ribbony flags of every color imaginable. Little glowing jars hung from the posts, and small glowing stones had been embedded in the wood. The stones continued in a graceful spiral pattern across the grass, all the way up to the fire pit, where Shebal and Marilda waited.

"Welcome, everyone!" Shebal said, standing with an elegant flourish. He wore a gossamer white dress that fell around his feet in waves. "I'm so happy to see you all again. And there's new faces, too!"

Gwen excitedly introduced her new partner, and Sid introduced his cousins, while Jason brought everyone else into the dining hall. Ava remembered Hafsa telling the group chat they'd renovated the building so that about a third of it was a sensory room, so she worried about everyone fitting inside. When the doors opened, though, she saw that the room was even bigger than it had been before, and certainly bigger than it was on the outside.

The room was dark, illuminated in colorful flashes by a spinning disco ball hanging from the ceiling. The tables had been pushed up along the wall that now had no windows, leaving ample space for a dance floor. They were set with table runners and dishes. The walls were strung up with the same colorful flags as the bridge, and the floor along the walls and surrounding the tables was lined with glowing rocks. In front of the service window, one of the tables was set up with DJ equipment. Sitting behind it, barely visible save for his tall red hat, was Little Gus, who looked exactly like a garden gnome.

"Wow," Ava said, looking around. "How did you make this place so big?"

"I know you've built houses and stuff, but this is out there," Genette added.

Jason laughed. "It wasn't my carpentry skills, no. Those stones aren't just decor, they're expanding the usable space without messing with the rest of the island, or something like that. Spells aren't my area of expertise."

Ava shrugged. "I'll take your word for it. I wouldn't know any better."

Shebal came inside and made his way to the front of the room. He picked up the microphone at the DJ booth to make an announcement.

"Welcome to Shimmering Lake Summer Camp," he said. "Tonight, we are hosting our own take on the Snow Ball, a traditional snow elf feast and dance that welcomes the first snow of a new winter. Together, snow elf communities share all the food that wouldn't keep through the long winters of their traditional mountain homelands, marking a delicious and cheerful farewell to the warm season. Tonight, we're here to celebrate Marilda, since she can't be home this August for her own Ball."

Marilda stepped up beside him, smiling and bowing. She wore a gorgeous ice blue gown that was only a few shades off from her skin tone. Blue and white flowers trailed down the dress from where they clustered around her bust. A heavy shawl of wolf fur was wrapped around her shoulders, the paws hanging down across her front and the head resting atop hers.

"And of course, we celebrate all of you, who can't attend your own end of school dances this year." Shebal beamed, the fine strands of spider silk in his dress catching the light. "Alright everyone, let's eat!"

Everyone took their seats, with Little Gus joining them. Big Gus did too, once he'd appeared from the washroom. They were matching in nice tuxedos.

After the orc came Gownik. He walked with minor difficulty on his flipperlike feet, his long, thick tail balancing him. He was dressed in fish leathers with glittering shells all down his back, tapering out to a trail of freshwater pearls that wrapped around his tail. His pointy webbed ears were adorned with glittery piercings, and his nose— which was just two slits between his triangular amber eyes— had a small loop piercing in it too. He came to sit beside Shebal, brushing his short, almost otterlike muzzle against his cheek to kiss him.

Then, streaming out from the kitchen came a line of what the campers and their friends could only assume were animatronics. There were seven of them, all looking like they were made of stone, standing tall on two humanoid legs that ended in sculpted lion's feet. Their lionlike tails hung low, draped in beaded silks, same as their slender torsos. Their long necks held elegant triangular heads that looked to be a mix of lion and Siamese cat, with rounded little ears and large, unblinking eyes. With thin humanoid arms, they held platters of fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables, cheese and crackers, and other small treats. The platters were laid out on the tables, then the statues returned to the kitchen.

"What were those things?" Henry asked, staring after them.

"Constructs," Shebal answered, serving himself roasted squirrel legs, a wedge of cheese with a fuzzy white rind, and bright blue snoberry jelly. "Animated statues. We rented them for this event, since everyone would be too well dressed to do kitchen work, and it would be unfair to make someone sit out of the festivities."

"Why couldn't we have had those at camp?"

"Where else would you learn to do the dishes?" Gwen teased her brother.

Ava, Shebal, and Genette laughed at that.

Everyone ate lavishly. There was an unenthusiastic reception to a few of the items offered, though, like the squirrel legs, which Hafsa loved, but the other campers didn't really want to try, aside from Ripley. Daisy-Anne dared Ben to eat one but he actually loved it, so he shared the plate with them. Mary stuck to the cattail shoots, dandelion salad, honeyed cakes, and berries, while Daisy-Anne and Sid ate mostly cheese and crackers. Ronnie added cooled blood to his salad, which really freaked out Nebula when they asked what it was.

"Can't help that I'm a vampire," he said.

Barclay gave him a proud little smile, knowing it's taken him a long time and a lot of therapy to get so comfortable openly sharing that.

When everyone had finished their light snacks and the constructs had cleared the plates away, Little Gus went back to the makeshift DJ booth and began to play music.

Genette swept Ava to her feet, making her protest between giggles. Everyone else stood up to dance: Gownik and Shebal, who moved slowly to make sure the lakefellow didn't stumble or trip anyone with his long tail, Ronnie and Barclay, Gwen and Nebula, and Hafsa and Sid.

"I don't have anyone to dance with," Daisy-Anne lamented, dramatically resting her chin in her hands as she stared at the scene.

"What, do you miss someone? Do you have a crush on someone?" her little brother teased, poking her shoulder over and over.

"No!" she said, poking him back, then sighed. "I wish I did though…"

"I don't get you," Mary said. "It's not like you need a partner

to dance with, anyway. You can dance on your own. It's not even a romantic song!" She got up, smiling. "Come and dance with me, you two."

Ben waved the floppy ends of his sleeves at her, but Daisy-Anne took her cousin's hand and spun off, dancing with her.

"Do you not want to dance?" Ripley asked Ben.

He shrugged, then scooted closer to him. "I like your pins."

"Thanks!" He flapped his hands. "Can I tell you about them?"

He nodded.

"This one's the gay flag, because I'm gay, and the trans flag because I'm trans. And these are pins of some of my favorite animals and cryptids. This is a pangolin, this is my drawing of a corn wolf, and this is a Fresno nightcrawler! These are some different maps of places I've been. And these I got from my dads for learning different wilderness skills. I'm not in Scouts or anything, they just make these and reward me when I learn different things."

Henry leaned over and said, "I taught you how to tie knots, you should give me credit for that one."

"I'm the best at tying knots," Ben bragged. "Even better than you."

"Oh yeah? Wanna show me?" Henry asked.

"With what?"

Jason came over from where he sat with Abigail at the far end of the table. "Don't tell Shebal, but I could grab you a bit of rope from the storage room."

"Awesome!" Ripley said.

He left to get some rope and returned during the next song. The three boys spent a while tying all sorts of different knots and quizzing each other, with Jason helping too.

Abigail finished her drink and stood up. She made her way

to where Marilda still sat.

"Hey," she said, leaning on the table beside her, her long braid falling over her shoulder. "Aren't feeling up for a dance?"

Marilda smiled. "It's just hot in this shawl, and I don't want to leave it unattended."

"Big Gus will keep an eye on it," she said.

"Will he?" she looked over at him and they both laughed; he was fully focused on his husband's work, as they talked in a version of sign language more comfortable for a gnome's pawlike hands.

"Well," Abigail offered with a smirk, "what if we danced close by?"

Her big, black eyes sparkled. "If you insist…"

Abigail offered her a hand and the pair took to the dance floor, only a few feet away.

Morgan smiled at the two women from where she and her two girlfriends sat. "I guess Abigail did have a bit of an awakening with Adi, eh?"

Laurie giggled. "Sure seems it." She looked at her longingly. "Why don't we go and dance too, my love?"

The werewolf shook herself, trying to get over her shyness. "I don't know… I don't like dancing in front of people."

"Neither do I," Laurie said, taking her hand in both of hers. "I get embarrassed. But I wouldn't be so embarrassed if I was dancing with you."

"And you know I love to dance," Cherry said, pulling her in for a kiss on the cheek. "I don't mind if either of you act silly. Dancing is about having fun and feeling yourself."

Morgan blushed and leaned into her. "I just don't want people watching me…"

"Nobody is, honey. They're all focused on themselves, I

promise."

Laurie got to her feet, and so did Cherry. They both took one of Morgan's hands and gently pulled her up as she jokingly told them to stop between giggles. The three twirled around the dance floor together. Soon, they grew to be completely absorbed in each other's company, not thinking once about anyone else.

After a couple more songs, Sid had to get some fresh air. He felt too warm, even with the air conditioning, and was getting a little dizzy. He left Hafsa to take a break and get a drink of water. He passed Gwen on the dance floor, who broke away from Nebula to say hi to him, but all he could muster was a meek wave.

The late evening air hit him as he stepped out onto the grass. His tiredness fled in the gently cooling breeze. The strange feeling in his head didn't, though. He looked across the clearing, following the glowing trail to the shore, to where the water lapped against the stones around the bridge and dock.

Another glow caught his eye. A person stood there, barely older than Sid himself, who he'd never seen before but instantly recognized. He was unearthly in the rich sunset light, poised carefully on the wet stones, like he didn't understand his two legs. He was pale as moonlight with pearly white hair that rambled down to his back, pressed against his skin with lakewater. He wore a midnight blue vest embroidered with elaborate silver swirls, not too unlike Sid's own, but affixed with emeralds and white diamonds. His floor length skirt was a deep green, aside from one slit from his hip down, which was filled in with sheer white fabric. He gazed longingly at Sid, a beautiful blue gaze that he knew too well.

He beckoned Sid closer.

He walked, feeling like he was in a dream, until he was only feet away.

The boy smiled, tilting his head ever so slightly, and said in a clear and gentle voice, "I've missed you."

"It's really you," Sid breathed, barely able to process what he was seeing. "The white kelpie."

His eyes betrayed his sadness. "Yes, that is who I am."

"I never thought I'd see you again. I was so afraid…" Sid trailed off, unable to stop a full body shudder.

The boy looked deeply into his dark brown eyes. "I remember," he whispered, moving to close the distance between them. "We're both here now, aren't we?"

Sid's heart leaped, his mind filling with flashes of memory: his lonely song keeping him up all night, his strength and gentleness as they played in the water together. The brown kelpie's teeth in his arm, his mother's face splitting open into that terrible mouth. Hafsa dragging him to shore. Hafsa tending to his wounds. Hafsa waiting up for him. Hafsa slipping a letter into his hand…

He stepped back. "I'm sorry. I… I have to go."

The white kelpie watched him retreat up the slope until he came to a stop outside the dining hall. Music slipped out from under the door, and the windows glimmered with swirling lights.

Sid got startled as the door opened and out stepped Ronnie and Barclay, faces flushed with energy and in the middle of a joke.

Barclay noticed the younger boy, whose cheeks were streaked with tears, and said, composing himself, "Hey, Sid. Are you okay?"

"I, uh," he stammered, looking over his shoulder. The shore

was empty, the waves lazily slapping the stones. "Uh. Yeah. I'm fine."

The couple watched him with concern as he hurried past them and back into the dance.

"That was weird," Ronnie said. "I hope he really is okay."

Barclay half frowned. "We don't know him well enough to say, or to really bother him about it," he said, taking his boyfriend's hand delicately and winding their fingers together. "It's okay, though. Tonight is about us."

Ronnie placed his hand on Barclay's warm cheek. "Yeah, it is." He leaned close until their lips brushed together, a soft, brief kiss, before pulling him into a hug.

Barclay laid his head against Ronnie's chest, turning his face so they could watch the night together, the endless expanse of stars reflected in flashes by the shells of shimmer crabs, floating on the surface of the deep, dark lake.

Night Swim

Hafsa hated leaving Silent Woods since the pandemic began, but she hated even more knowing her boyfriend and best friends were stuck out there, risking their lives every day. She didn't understand why she couldn't just bring them all home to her island to be safe. This wasn't the first time she'd struggled with this guilt, though, living in a place that kept itself safe while letting the Outside world fend for itself. Her parents and siblings were used to it. She was finding ways to be okay with it during COVID, too.

She'd been doing her best to keep in touch with everyone through their group chat, asking how people were coping with the isolation, what getting tested was like, and how they were managing with online school. She even sent a couple care packages the thankfully few times that her friends got sick. She prayed every day that those would be the only times.

She was also sending everyone photos of things around Shimmering Lake, and updating them on Red and Bryllig. Red was a yearling now, and loved to play with Bryllig. He didn't have his human disguise yet, but he liked to swim with little Bryllig, pulling Bryllig around on the floaties that Big Gus had brought down from his shop. He was incredibly gentle with Bryllig, and it made Hafsa more comfortable leaving her baby

niece while she went to visit Gwen.

Apparently, Gwen had convinced her parents that it was okay to have her come over, even though their household was already coupled up with their nearest neighbors. She had promised she hadn't said anything about Silent Woods, but Hafsa had no idea what else could have convinced them it was safe.

She packed a bag and asked Tyk, the serval who had acted as a nanny for her when she was little, to drive her to Gwen's place for the weekend. When she was dropped off, she knocked on Gwen's door, twisting her suitcase on its wheels this way and that.

Gwen opened the door just a crack, peeking out from behind it with a mask on. "Do you have any symptoms?" she asked.

"What? You know I'm not sick," Hafsa hissed. "There's no COVID in Silent Woods. Oh, wait, do your parents need to—"

"My parents aren't here," Gwen said, exasperated. "Them and Cole are stuck at my aunt and uncle's place in Kingston because even though there's a pandemic on, they decided to visit, and all of them got sick."

"That's terrible."

"Exactly! I don't want to get sick either! Do you have symptoms?"

Hafsa sighed. "Where would I have been exposed? You know I'm not sick."

"What about the trip here?"

"What, do you think I Ubered? Tyk drove me."

"A tick drove you?"

"A ti—? Ugh, nevermind, no, I don't have a cough, a fever, aches, runny nose, whatever."

Gwen looked at her scrutinizingly, but said a curt thank you and opened the door.

Hafsa dragged her suitcase over the threshold as she stepped into the foyer. She got her shoes off and followed Gwen to the kitchen for a glass of water. Henry was sitting on the couch in the living room just beyond the kitchen island; they exchanged a somewhat tense wave and nod.

"Do you want dinner?" Gwen asked, opening the fridge.

"Sure, what do you have?"

She picked up a Tupperware of what looked like spaghetti with some extra green noodles. "Hmm, this is Cole's leftovers I think… Spaghetti with zucchini spirals. It still looks good? It's only a few days old anyway."

"That's got pork in it," Henry called from the couch before Hafsa could say anything.

"So?" Gwen said, then, "Ugh, I'm sorry, I'm so stupid! I forgot you don't eat pork."

"It's fine," Hafsa murmured, wondering why Henry remembered but Gwen didn't. "What else do you have?"

She closed the fridge and opened the freezer drawer at the bottom. "Veggie chicken nuggets… Chicken pot pie. That's kind of it for meals."

Hafsa saw there was more food, but didn't say anything. "I'll have some of the veggie nuggets then, I guess."

Gwen covered a baking tray with the nuggets and stuck it in the oven.

"So, uh, how are you and Nebula doing?" Hafsa asked awkwardly, leaning against the kitchen island.

"Fine," Gwen answered defensively.

Henry glanced at them, but didn't say anything.

"Sorry I asked," Hafsa said. "Are you feeling okay right now, Gwen? You've—"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay," she said, cutting her off. She raised

her hands and sighed loudly. "I'm fine. There's just a lot going on right now, okay? Obviously. But you wouldn't understand that."

Hafsa recoiled, scoffing. "Do you think I don't get how bad COVID is just because I live in Silent Woods? Did you forget my family still lives in Ottawa? That Sid still lives with his uncle and grandma?"

Gwen turned away from her and said, "That isn't what I'm stressed about."

Hafsa froze for a moment, then her shoulders slumped. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"It's fine," she said. "I'm sorry. It's nothing."

They both stood quietly until the oven timer beeped and Gwen took the nuggets out. She dumped them on a plate.

"Do you want ketchup?"

"Sure."

She grabbed the bottle of ketchup from the fridge. "Let's go to my room."

Hafsa followed her down the hall and up the spiral staircase. They could hear Ava's music playing from behind her closed door. Stepping into Gwen's room, she shut the door behind her.

Her room was small, but full of Gwen's whole life. Her bed was tucked into the corner diagonal from the door, draped in her *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* blanket, with a small nightstand beside it, holding her perfumes, hair accessories, and nail polish. Her dresser was beside that, plus a standing mirror in the corner, covered in kitten stickers. She had a clothes rack standing along the wall, and a plush pink carpet filling the space between it and her bed. In the other half of her room was where her desk sat, plus a plush green armchair looking out the

window at their front lawn. Her desk had an old iMac monitor, one of the pink see-through ones, but it wasn't plugged into anything. She had a modern laptop covered in stickers beside it, plus a couple notebooks and a stack of graphic novels. The armchair was covered in stuffed toys: cats, bunnies, and dogs of all colors and sizes, even some of those Jellycat toys that were food, spilling onto the floor around it. There were posters on her walls: Justin Bieber, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, Hello Kitty, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, Halsey, *Steven Universe*.

Hafsa sat down on the desk chair. "I'm sorry for snapping at you," she said as she let out a breath. "I'm… I'm sorry I can't be calm and patient like Sid is."

Gwen stared at her for a moment, then hurried to sit on her bed, leaving the plate on her desk. "I… Um—"

"I'm sorry," she interrupted, "I just… I've been thinking about my, y'know, behavior, because Sid and I had a pretty big fight recently, and I, just, I made it a lot worse because I'm so… Hotheaded."

"Oh." Gwen fiddled with her blanket. "I'm sorry, that's hard… What happened?"

"I don't really wanna talk about it, but we're okay now."

"That's good," Gwen said, sounding distracted. "I'm, um, I'm sorry about how I acted in the past too."

Hafsa looked up at her, surprised. She didn't know what to say, so she waited for her to continue.

"I was pretty, um, rude when we first met," she mumbled, lifting her hand to pull at her hair, but putting it back down and under her leg after a moment. "I said some stuff that wasn't very nice to you and your family."

Hafsa felt a pang of frustration, but pushed it away. Gwen was trying to apologize, right? And she'd just make it worse if

she kept being so angry. She managed a laugh, but it hurt. "It's fine. I mean, the whole situation was kind of ridiculous. I still laugh sometimes remembering that you called me Arabic."

Gwen's cheeks reddened and she frowned. "I know you're just a catfolk now, why bring that up?"

Hafsa blinked, trying to smile. "No, like, that's… That's a language. Arab is the race. You meant Arab, right?"

Gwen just started at her blankly.

A knock at the door saved Hafsa.

"Who is it?"

"Just me," Ava said.

"Come in."

She opened the door and looked surprised to see Hafsa. "Oh, hey. I didn't know you were here. I was just gonna ask if Gwen wanted dinner. I was going to make omelettes for me and Henry. You can have one too if you want."

Hafsa accepted before Gwen could say anything, so the two of them went downstairs to help cook, munching on the veggie nuggets at the same time.

After eating dinner with Ava and Henry, they watched Henry play *Red Dead Redemption 2* on their Playstation 4.

As the sun went down, it turned the lake and the sky into twin smears of brilliant blood red, fading to oranges and yellows. The trees on the far shore were dark brushstrokes, and Hafsa could see the headlights of the few cars driving along the lonely road, like shooting stars in the dark. Hafsa kept gazing longingly at the water, thinking of home, and kind of wishing she hadn't come at all.

"Do you wanna go swimming?" Gwen whispered to her as Ava teased Henry about something that he did in the game.

"I didn't bring a swimsuit."

"You can be your lion self!"

She tilted her head, humming thoughtfully. "That's a good idea… Maybe when it's a bit darker, though? I don't want your neighbors to see."

"Sure! We have all night. Wanna go roast some marshmallows while we— oh, shoot, that's not allowed for you, is it?"

"Not unless you have vegan ones," she said. "Or if they're made with beef gelatin." Sometimes she had normal marshmallows, but the petty part of her wanted to give Gwen a hard time because of what she'd said— or hadn't said— upstairs.

"I'll check." She got up and went to the kitchen, Hafsa beside her. She used a stool to reach the top of the fridge and checked the bag. "Well, what do you know! These are vegan."

Hafsa laughed. "Really? I didn't think people bought halal marshmallows unless they needed to."

Gwen shrugged. "I have no idea why we have them, to be honest. Maybe they were just on sale or something. Let's make s'mores! You can have those, right?"

She laughed again, softer. "Yes, I can." At least Gwen was making an effort. Maybe things didn't have to be all that bad.

"I hope they melt right," she said. "Vegan food is weird." She got down from the stool with the bag of marshmallows and got two chocolate bars and a box of graham crackers from the cupboard, then yelled to Ava and Henry that they were going outside.

"You don't have to yell," Ava said from the couch. "We are literally right here."

Henry reached over and opened the door for them as they crossed the room, even though Hafsa hurried ahead, wanting to open it for Gwen.

"Thanks," she said, grabbing the door to hold it open.

They walked down to the fire pit and Hafsa got to starting a fire. Gwen found the metal skewers and brushed bits of twigs and leaves from the chairs.

"So," Hafsa said, surprising herself, "what was stressing you out earlier? Do you want to talk about it?"

Gwen sat down and shrugged. "It's nothing," she said, but quickly followed up with, "I'm polyamorous."

"Oh," Hafsa breathed. "Thanks for telling me."

Gwen got out her phone and started urgently sending texts.

Hafsa tried to focus on the fire, not thinking about what was going on. She still felt uncomfortable being here, but maybe it would get better now that Gwen has that off her chest. Maybe Hafsa was taking it for granted how easy it is for her to be openly trans and bi. She must just not get it. She often felt like she didn't quite get it when she was around Gwen.

"Have you ever thought about polyamory?" Gwen asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"It's never really crossed my mind," she admitted. "What does Nebula think?"

"Oh, they're fine with it," she said dismissively.

"How long have you known?"

"I've been thinking about it since Pride…"

Hafsa remembered the things that Gwen had said when they said goodbye that day. She grabbed the bag of marshmallows and busied herself with making s'mores. They didn't talk about polyamory anymore, and by the time the sun was fully below the horizon, they had eaten their fill of the messy snacks and were ready to swim.

Hafsa leaped up and turned into her lion self, shaking out her scrappy mane.

Gwen asked, "Is it okay if I skinny dip?"

"I'm basically skinny dipping anyway. Go wild."

Gwen shed her clothes as Hafsa looked away politely, then the pair ran down to the dock and leaped into the lake.

They played together in the water for what felt like hours, splashing and chasing each other. Hafsa dove to claw up clumps of slimy weeds to throw at Gwen, who squealed and slung water in self defense. When they wrestled, Hafsa was exceedingly careful not to hurt her, keeping her claws sheathed and being as gentle as she was with Bryllig. Gwen got harder punches in, and dug her fingers painfully deep into her mane, but Hafsa didn't say anything, not wanting to trigger her.

When they were too tired to keep swimming, they hauled out of the lake and dried off. Hafsa changed back before they went inside, not wanting to leave big dripping lion tracks throughout their house. They drank some water, then brushed their teeth together in the upstairs bathroom.

"You can sleep in my bed if you want," Gwen said as she rinsed her toothbrush off.

"I wouldn't want to kick you out of your own bedroom."

"Oh, I meant we could share," she clarified, blushing.

Hafsa froze up for a moment before saying, "The couch is fine for me. Thanks though."

"Oh, okay. Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Laying in the dark on the couch, Hafsa couldn't sleep. The unfamiliar space looked even more huge and foreboding in the darkness. Even though the lapping of the lake and the sounds of night animals still sung her to sleep, it wasn't the same as back home. That was somehow even more disturbing than the cars and yelling of drunk people she heard when she stayed with her human family downtown.

Her thoughts kept slipping to Gwen's coming out, and her awkward apology. She didn't feel like it was a good enough apology, but knowing Gwen, it had to be, right? She was always so sensitive and didn't think about what she was doing wrong. It was a lot for her to apologize at all. She should just accept it and move on.

Her phone buzzed. She checked it.

Sid: Hey um, are you up?

Hafsa: yeah, why??

Sid: So… Gwen just asked me out

Sid: Apparently she's polyamorous

Hafsa: what???

Hafsa: i mean she did come out to me today

Hafsa: but she asked you out????

Before Sid could reply, she got another text, this time from Gwen.

Gwen: this is maybe a little out of nowhere, but i really like u and u make me really happy and well i think it would be great if we could be partners

She stared at her phone. She didn't know what to think. On autopilot, her fingers wrote their own response:

Hafsa: i guess i'd like that too

But would she?

She wanted to be happy. She wanted Gwen and Sid to be happy, too. That's all, really. Maybe this would make them all happy. But deep down, she felt cold. The same cold she'd felt when Gwen had called her Arabic, and she hadn't called her out on it. The same kind of cold that she'd felt years before, when her closest friends at school made fun of her for choosing to wear the hijab.

The same cold that came when she lost those friends forever.

She didn't know what to think. She rolled over and tried to get some sleep.

Halloween, 2020

By October, some things were better, and some things were worse, and some things were just the same. But on Halloween night, Cherry, Laurie, and Morgan had decided they were owed a little time with their little siblings. It took no convincing to get DeeDee on board with trick or treating with them, and her parents agreed, as long as it was in their neighborhood where there'd probably be less people, or at least more room to keep social distancing. Trace took only an ounce more effort to convince, and that was only because, as the girls had sussed out, he and DeeDee were secretly in an intense rivalry throughout middle school, which had carried over into high school— and Trace was at a disadvantage now, since he was better at sports and worse at, well, the rest of school. With lockdowns and online school, he couldn't hold anything over DeeDee's head, but maybe this would give him a shot at getting more candy than her.

Brody and Kyle, though, were harder to get through to. Even though Laurie's parents, like Pa, had cleared their idea as long as everyone tested before and after, stayed masked the whole time, and didn't share— or in Kyle and Brody's case, even take— any candy, the two boys had their own complaints. Kyle, being in grade nine now— the same age as DeeDee and Trace— was

too old for this stuff, apparently. Brody was a year younger. He'd always loved Halloween, but this year, he'd been trying to be more like his brother. Despite Laurie's attempts at bribing him with everything from fish tank supplies to a new model house, he kept sadly declining, saying he and Kyle were gonna stay up late watching scary movies instead.

Laurie felt terrible that Kyle was making Brody miss out on what might be his last chance to trick or treat before he got too old, but if he wasn't budging for a new model house, she couldn't think of any better way to sway him.

"We can always try next year," Cherry reassured her. "And hey, maybe Kyle isn't being as hard on him as you think."

"That's a little too optimistic for me," she said with a sad laugh, "but yeah, we'll try next year."

Even though they weren't gonna be home to enjoy it, the three girls decorated their house and left out a bowl of candy for any hopeful trick or treaters who might come around. They put a big spider on the door, hung little ghosts to hang from the awning, and wrapped the awning posts with black and orange streamers. They even made a little graveyard on the front lawn, complete with random severed limbs, which Cherry thought were hysterical and kept hiding around the house.

Laurie had bounced around costume ideas for a couple months leading up to Halloween, but eventually settled on the one that was easiest to get a costume for on short notice: Spiderman. At first, she'd been kind of bummed about not being able to make her own cosplay of a more niche superhero for one of the last Halloweens she'd get to go door to door for, but the stress of trying to make something with everything going on was outweighing the relief of just ordering something online.

Cherry was the opposite. She and DeeDee were doing matching costumes this year. She'd been learning some things from Abigail to make it better. They were going as mermaids, and she wasn't happy with the costumes that she could find in stores or online, with their flat colors and printed patterns. She sewed sequins onto the tail, fins onto the hips, and even made a set of translucent plastic harnesses for a fin in the middle of her back, on her sides, and on her upper arms.

Morgan hadn't told her girlfriends anything about a costume, but she did stop Cherry with a question one morning as they were drinking their coffees.

"Can you sister keep a secret?"

"To the grave. She's one of the most private people I know."

"I don't mean her own secrets," she said. "How's she about other people's?"

"Perfect," she said. "She's never started a rumor or tattled. At least not that I've heard of. Why do you wanna know?"

She tried her best not to smile too much, feeling like she'd give away the surprise. "Oh, just curious."

Cherry squinted at her and reached out to pinch her arm, but she dodged. "Morgan! You can't leave me hanging like that."

"Oh, I can," she snorted a laugh. "It'll spoil the surprise!"

Staring after her as she walked away, Cherry's eyes widened. "Hey, you're not thinking of—"

"No no, don't even guess. You'll just have to wait and see."

When the day came, Cherry got Laurie in on cornering Morgan and getting her to spill the beans. At first, they just asked her outright what the surprise was, and what secret DeeDee needed to keep. Cherry already had an idea, but she wanted to make Morgan say it. When she wouldn't, the two of them tackled her and pinned her to the bed, tickling her until

she couldn't breathe.

"Okay, okay! You got me," she begged, gasping for breath between laughs. She wriggled out of their grasp and buried herself in their blankets. "I'll tell you, just stop!"

Cherry sat back on the bed, throwing her legs over Morgan's back. "We won't let you get up until you do!"

Laurie was poised to start tickling her again, but Morgan quickly told them her plan.

"I knew it," Cherry said, letting Morgan up. "It's not like it could be anything else."

"I said no guessing," Morgan laughed, hitting her with a pillow. "It's a good one, right? Free costume, free icebreaker, getting closer with your family…"

"But you can't—" Laurie said, shaking her head. "I mean… Are you sure? Only us and the other campers know."

"And Journee and Parker," Cherry pointed out.

"They're different!"

"But Trace knows," Morgan said. "Cherry… Your family has been so kind to me. I've never really had a whole family who I can feel like myself around, but with them, I… I really get to. They're so important to me." She took Cherry's hand. "Being a werewolf is part of who I am, no matter how… How different and scary that is. I don't know about telling everybody, but I trust your siblings, and what better way than this?"

Cherry wiped tears from her cheeks and pulled her into a hug. "I love you so much, Morgan. You deserve to have a loving family who accepts you and makes you feel safe."

"I-I agree," Laurie stammered, "but isn't this… Isn't this a bit dangerous?"

"DeeDee would never tell a soul," Cherry said. "She's gonna think this is the coolest thing in the world."

"So does Trace," Morgan murmured from where her face had been buried in her collarbone.

"But what if she thinks it's so cool that she's got to tell everyone?" Laurie fretted.

Morgan pushed away from Cherry so she could talk. "Trace has accidentally let it slip to a few of his friends at school. Since he and DeeDee were apparently in the same circles this whole time, she might already have heard something… That doesn't mean all those kids are gonna believe it, though." She reached out to squeeze Laurie's hand now, too. "My brother is awesome, but he's also a bit of, uh, a loser at school. He's not the most popular. Even if DeeDee starts backing him, which I'm sure she won't on purpose, I doubt anybody will seriously believe them." She shrugged. "Teenagers say a lot of stuff that isn't necessarily true."

"DeeDee isn't the most popular either," Cherry laughed lightly. "Her peers knew she was autistic before her doctor did. She does not have the social cred to have anybody believing that her sister-in-law is a werewolf."

Morgan's cheeks flushed. Sister-in-law… Wow, she never thought she'd be called that. "B-but I hope she does think it's cool. I'm serious about telling her. And Arty and Aric, too, if you think they'd want to know."

Cherry cupped her face. "Do you want them to know, baby?"

She closed her eyes, blushing darker, and nodded.

She planted a kiss on her nose. "Then we'll tell them."

All in their costumes, they piled into their VW bus and headed out to meet DeeDee and Trace. There was no traffic, so they were there fast, and found the two young teens sitting six feet apart on the curb outside DeeDee's house, in the light of dozens of bright Halloween decorations: glowing ghosts, gravestones

with mood lighting, and a giant skeleton covered in orange string lights. Trace was in his hockey gear, which Morgan scoffed at from the front seat, since that was such a cop out. DeeDee looked great in her costume, though. Cherry had done a really good job on the modifications.

Morgan waited in the car after Cherry parked it in her family's driveway. She watched as Cherry and Laurie got out and greeted Trace and DeeDee, who jumped up to see them but kept their distance.

Right away, Cherry asked, "Where's Mom and Dad?"

DeeDee stuck her thumb over her shoulder. "Watching a movie in their room. Why?"

"And Aric's in his room too?" she asked. Aric didn't like Halloween, so he usually spent the evening holed up on his own reading. Arty was living with their grandfather for the time being, helping out, so she knew she didn't have to ask about him.

She nodded, but looked at her suspiciously. "Why are you being weird?"

Cherry couldn't help but flap her hands as she said, "We've got a big surprise for you."

Laurie, taking a deep breath, walked stiffly back to the van and opened the passenger door. Face to face with Morgan the wolf, she whispered, "Are you sure you want to do this? It's not too late to turn back."

Morgan licked her hand.

Laurie smiled, stroked her ears, and stepped out of the way.

Trace and DeeDee both gasped as Morgan jumped down onto the pavement.

DeeDee backed up, hands coming up to her chest, but her eyes were crinkled in a grin and she was bouncing on her toes.

"You got a dog?!"

Trace's eyes flicked from her, to Morgan, and then to Laurie and Cherry. He didn't say anything, though.

"Not exactly," Cherry said, a nervous laugh bubbling up. She gestured to Morgan. "This is… This is Morgan's costume."

"Her costume?" she said quizzically. She did not look like she believed her.

"Well," Laurie said, "not quite her costume…"

"Whose stupid idea was this?" Trace asked, angry.

Cherry, Laurie, and Morgan all looked at him in surprise.

"When did your voice drop?" Morgan asked, her voice a weird growl but unmistakably English.

DeeDee made a noise halfway between a scream and a gasp.

"When did you learn to talk?" Trace shot back.

"She met another werewolf, he's been teaching her," Cherry answered.

"Wait wait wait, another werewolf?" DeeDee said, quickly taking a few steps forwards with her hands raised in front of her. "Somebody better start explaining real quick."

"My sister is a werewolf," Trace answered, shooting a frustrated look at Cherry and Laurie. "There was totally a better way to go about this, but yeah, I guess we're telling you this now. Somebody could have told me that was the plan, though."

"Sorry," Morgan rasped. "I got excited."

"We all did," Cherry said, laughing again.

"For the record, I thought we were rushing things," Laurie said.

DeeDee stood there, visibly processing it for a moment, before she turned to Trace with a scowl and said, "So that's why you're so good at sports! You have a biological advantage. That's so not fair!"

"What?"

"Uh, duh? You're a werewolf? So you're stronger and faster—"

He laughed so hard he doubled over. "No! No, I'm not. Just Morgan. She got bit when we were little." He straightened up and adjusted his mask, wiping his eyes. "No, but that's a great idea though. Morgan, you should bite me—"

She barked a laugh. "Not happening."

DeeDee stuck her tongue out at him as he sighed loudly and banged his stick around on the ground.

"I love your costumes, by the way," DeeDee said to Laurie and Cherry. "So let's get going? I want to get as much candy as I can."

"What, that's it on the werewolf thing?" Cherry snorted.

"There's a global pandemic," DeeDee sighed, shrugging. "This is not the craziest thing to happen to me this week."

"Right," Laurie said. "Right. Let's go then."

The five of them headed off, staying adequately spaced apart. Not many houses were decorated, and many of the ones that were had signs saying they weren't giving out any candy this year. A few people had bowls out, and one family was sitting in their garage in costume, but didn't let them get close.

Cherry perked up when they got to a large parking lot with a set of garbage bins at the back. "Oh hey, Morgan, know where we're at? We're behind our old school." She looked over her shoulder at Trace and DeeDee; Trace was trying to poke DeeDee with his stick. "Hey, this is your school now. Are you taking good care of it?"

Trace laughed, nonchalantly slinging his stick over his shoulder. "You bet."

"There's a path that way, into those trees. There's a small creek and a bridge, but it isn't very big, so we'll have to go

single file to stay socially distanced. That'll bring us to the yard, though, if you wanna check it out at night."

Trace bounced forward. "Yeah, sure!"

Morgan trotted ahead, wagging her tail. She took in the smells of the water, the leaf litter, the animals… And was that—

"Woah!" Barclay gasped.

Morgan stopped. She watched him stumble back and grab Ronnie's arm. They were both dressed up, as a classy vampire and his bleeding victim. Though she could recognize them by scent alone, they didn't know it was her.

Behind her, Cherry called a hello and jogged over, stopping beside Morgan and petting her head.

"Cherry! You know this, uh—" Ronnie's eyes suddenly opened wide. "Oh! Morgan?"

Barclay gasped again. "Morgan, you're— in public? Why?"

"It's Halloween," she rasped.

Ronnie laughed. "Oh wow, you can talk now too! That's crazy."

Laurie was there in a second, but the kids stayed at the other end of the bridge. Everyone caught up with each other, getting off the bridge and onto the field so Ronnie and Barclay could say hi to DeeDee and Trace. The boys joined them as they walked across the big, dark field, feeling the eeriness of it all hanging heavy in the air. Trace and DeeDee were bickering about something, Laurie and Barclay were chatting, and Cherry was watching the stars as Ronnie gushed to Morgan about the support group Jason had recommended for him.

"There's all these other shapeshifters," he was saying. "It's so awesome. I've never felt so understood by a group of people. I'm so glad you got me to text him, Morgan." He kicked a clump of wet grass. "Hey, why don't you come sometime? It's over

Zoom now, with, well, you know. I can give you the link if you want."

She turned her ears back.

"You don't have to commit to it, even if you go more than once. You can just sit in on a few meetings and see how it makes you feel. Especially since I'd be vouching for you."

Morgan's automatic response was still no, but she was less sure this time. "I don't know about meeting that many new people in such a stressful environment."

Laurie piped up behind them, saying, "That's how we met, sweetie."

She sneezed a laugh and swished her tail.

"It would be a great chance to make more friends like Parker," Cherry pointed out.

That was true and she knew it. She knew she wanted that, too. "I'll think about it," she said, but in her heart, she knew she'd go.

To Be Yours

Sitting at the small kitchen table that rocked from one corner to the other as she rested her arms on it, Morgan looked across at Laurie, taking in her gray eyes, set like precious pools of storm in her narrow, delicate face. These past couple years had waned away the roundness of her cheeks, and subsequently given it to Morgan: her skin and hair had softened, lifting her love to the surface, though her hands were still calloused from the carpentry work that she had picked up to pass the time while she didn't trust working in a store.

This was their third Christmas together, and their first alone, even if briefly; Cherry was on her way home from her parents' house. They had some time to be quiet together, but there was something each of them wanted to say.

"I never knew the words for this before I met you," Morgan said softly, her dark brown hair falling over her shoulder, turned amber in some places by the warm light, "but when you told me you were butch, I knew could be what I wanted in myself. When I realized as a kid that I was a girl, I thought I had to fully lean into femininity. It was hard for a long time, because I was closeted for so long. Making my own femininity was important to me. It let me reclaim who I was when I wasn't able to speak for myself." She paused, blush creeping up her

neck, a bit embarrassed to be talking about this. She glanced down at her favorite skirt, running her fingers across the fabric. It sewn together from some of her clothes that had torn apart when she'd transformed into a wolf in front of her friends by accident. Her shirt, too, was unusual patchwork, with a pattern that she'd helped to stitch on herself, pieced together from some of her favorite artwork painted or stamped onto fabric, pieced together like much of her identity. "I don't think much about passing, even now that I'm openly a woman… Well, I try not to. But I know when I do pass as a woman, it's never a straight, cis woman."

"I also made my own masculinity as a kid," Laurie said, placing her small hand over Morgan's. "I got my hearing aids when I was young, and my family sheltered me… So even though I was never really in Deaf culture and still don't feel like I'm a part of it, everyone in my life knew about my deafness. It was hard. Everyone, my teachers, tutors, family members and every kid I ever met treated me like I was weak and fragile, as if having hearing aids meant I could get hurt easier. Like I couldn't look out for myself. It helped to lean into the masculinity my dad offered, with getting me tailored suits and menswear. It's like a shield." She looked down at the painted top of the table, tracing the swirls of color with her eyes. "Being a premature baby and staying this small my whole life didn't help," she added with a meek laugh. "People don't think the tiny, skinny, deaf kid is remotely butch."

Morgan laughed too. "Yeah, and people don't expect anyone who's six feet tall, muscular, and a wolf to be femme."

Laurie nodded. "Kind of like you, I took the things people saw as shortcomings in me and made them why I'm butch. I know I'm never going to be big and strong enough to physically

protect you and Cherry, but I try to be a home for you." She felt herself blushing, only increasing under Morgan's gentle gaze and soft, welcoming smile. "I still have a lot of anxiety about, well, everything, but it turns off more and more when you need me. I can always be there for you. It's my job."

"You're so important to me," Morgan said, her voice barely above the hum of the refrigerator.

"And you are to me." Laurie lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles.

Morgan turned her hand to cup her cheek, running the flat of her thumb along her cheekbone; delicate, pristine, unbreakable.

"I'm sure you've noticed," Laurie went on, not lifting away from Morgan's touch, but pressing closer, "that when I'm scared, you're who I turn to. You protect me, and I feel at ease on your arm. I love to be held by you when the world is too scary for me. I love when you make me feel small… It's a different kind of smallness, a different kind of fragility."

"Like a little baby bunny," Morgan said with a grin, cupping her face and squishing her cheeks.

She squealed and blushed, smiling so much she had to squeeze her eyes shut. "And you're my big strong wolf."

She laughed, and then they both laughed, and then Morgan stood and swept Laurie out of her seat, twirling her once, twice before pulling her into a big hug against her chest. They stood together in the singing silence of their kitchen, their home, for as long as they needed to.

Morgan said, "For you I'll be stronger than anything you need to face. I love to help you and keep you safe. I love to run the buzzers against the back of your head and feel the weight come off your shoulders."

"And I love to wash, dry, and braid your beautiful hair… I

love to help you smudge. I love to rub your hands when they're sore, I love to make the two of you breakfast." Laurie smiled up at her, her eyes full of light. "I love to see you become a part of yourself nobody else gets to see."

"I love to see the softness in you that the world can't crush." She bent her head to kiss her lips. "You bring out the strength and confidence in me that I was so afraid to embrace."

"That's what I'm here for." Laurie reached up and ran a thumb along her lip; Morgan kissed it.

"I'll always be your femme, or your butch, or… Or anything you need me to be."

"And I'll always be your butch," Laurie whispered, and pulled her into a kiss. "And anything you need me to be, too."

Happiness

It was a beautiful, warm day in May, just over a year into the pandemic. Morgan and Hafsa had been chatting online a lot lately, bonding over their shared experiences of being trans girl shapeshifters in polyamorous relationships. Morgan had come to see Hafsa as a little sister, and since she knew there was no chance of her giving her COVID, she invited her to hang out downtown for a while. They both needed the break in routine.

Morgan's leg bounced as she sat on the edge of the fountain in Confederation Park, the nice little park that was tucked between City Hall, the Rideau Centre mall, the canal, and the fancy Lord Elgin hotel, right in the heart of Ottawa. The trees were smattered with fresh spring green, and the air carried the smells of the newly refilled canal and early flowers, even through the heaviness of car exhaust. There were some people honking and yelling nearby, but Morgan tuned it out. She drummed her fingers on the stone beside her with one hand, the other hand anxiously fiddling with her phone, hoping Hafsa wouldn't be too long now.

"Hey Morgan!"

She looked up to see Hafsa jogging towards her, her eyes crinkled up in a smile. She was wearing a long yellow sundress over a green long sleeve shirt, chunky black heels, an orange

and yellow hijab, and a black mask. She had a purse shaped like a sunflower that was banging against her hip. She stopped a few feet away and waved at her excitedly.

"Hey," Morgan said, standing up and brushing tiny bits of rock from the backs of her thighs and jean shorts. "How was the drive here?"

"Not bad. How was the walk?"

"Good! It's such a nice day."

"It is! What do you wanna do?"

"I'm hungry. Do you want to get something to eat in the Market?"

She nodded. "Sounds good to me!"

The two of them walked together through the park, to the stairs that led to the bridge over the canal. In the middle of the bridge, they crossed the street at the lights to enter the Rideau Centre. Morgan put her mask on before they opened the doors. The cold air blasted them as they stepped inside. They stopped at Booster Juice, one of the first stores by the entrance, to get a couple smoothies before heading down the hall, past the Nordstrom, and down the escalator to the floor below. There, they took a right and headed to the other end of the mall to step out into the heat again, pulling their masks down to sip their drinks.

"Do you have a restaurant in mind?" Hafsa asked.

"There's a banh mi place I like that's maybe five blocks away," Morgan said.

"Ooh, okay! I haven't had banh mi in ages."

The two girls chatted as they walked up the road, staying on the shaded side of the street, passing storefronts. They made their way to the wide sidewalk path beside the LRT station, having to skirt past some fences around a hole in the middle of

the sidewalk. There was more construction at the end of the short path between the station and the restaurants across the way.

At the end of the path, they stood facing the main building of the Byward Market, an enclosed marketplace with a bunch of shops, restaurants, and that one bakery that hadn't gotten over the time Obama visited Ottawa. The courtyard in front of it was empty now, aside from the planters and places to sit, which made Morgan sad. She used to come watch buskers down here with her family pretty often. COVID had stopped all of that.

Crossing the street, they passed a BeaverTails, an ice cream shop, and the CTV headquarters as they walked right for a block. They stopped to look at this huge mural, a whale filled with sea creatures and colorful shapes, that took up the whole side wall of the radio station. Hafsa got Morgan to take a picture of her in front of it before they carried on, turning left at the corner.

They talked about Hafsa's school, how she wasn't struggling as much with her remote learning as her friends and classmates were. Her grades weren't the best, but they kinda never had been. She was at least handing in the same amount of assignments as before the pandemic.

Morgan couldn't relate. "The pandemic is part of why I didn't make it to college or university," she said. "I was going to go to the Toronto Film School, but COVID kind of turned everything on its head. It wasn't the only factor, but… Yeah. I didn't want to put myself through all of that again, trying to apply this year. Maybe sometime in the future, but I'm having fun with my new job."

"Are you still doing carpentry? I loved the dining set you posted a few months ago. So much better than the chairs we made at camp, haha."

She gave a light, shy laugh. "Thank you. I am still doing some of that. Jason sells some of my pieces for me. But I'm working for UberEats now. It's cool because I get to bike all the time and I can work when I want… Though I still don't make as much as Laurie or Cherry."

"Right, yeah," Hafsa said.

"I don't think I'll stick to this forever, but it's at least a great way to get exercise and not have to be stuck in a store with hundreds of customers every day."

They got to the restaurant and they both ordered a beef banh mi. They took it to go, heading back to the park. They wanted to sit by the fountain again.

"What about you, are you going to get a job?" Morgan asked Hafsa as they walked down the street.

"I don't think so. Not yet anyway. It's hard to get a job in Ottawa when I spend all my holidays in Silent Woods. Even now that I have a car, it's kinda inconvenient. Plus… I don't really have a license that would be accepted out here, but I guess I can just do this." She tucked her wrapped sandwich under her arm to open her purse. She pulled out her wallet and showed Morgan her license, a small card very similar to an Ontario driver's license, but it appeared hazy at first. It slowly morphed into exactly what any Ottawa cop would expect to see: a perfectly valid driver's license, complete with her full name and Ottawa address.

"How…?"

"Just a little magic trick." Hafsa grinned. "As you can imagine, it's very useful."

"You're only 16 and you're already a criminal."

She laughed. "Not a criminal! Just a bad influence on my niece."

They both laughed at that, then Morgan asked how Bryllig was doing.

"Oh, great! Bryllig and Red are still best friends. It's so cute to see. He's started experimenting with human forms and Bryllig thinks it's so funny. It's hard to believe they're both almost two."

"Tell me about it… My little brother is taller than me now, it wigs me out. Time really flies."

Hafsa nodded. "I'm so happy I'm finally old enough to drive, though. I'm starting to learn how to get places using Silent Woods so it takes like, half the time to get to Ottawa now. I can visit Sid really easily, too!"

"That's great," Morgan said with a smile. She took a sip of her smoothie, then asked, "How's Sid doing?"

"He's okay. He's struggling a lot with online classes and stuff, but I've been helping him out. Gwen's good, though. She's actually been doing better since the switch."

"That's good. I'm glad you're all able to support each other."

Hafsa shrugged dismissively.

They put their masks back on to go through the mall, spending as little time inside as possible. They chatted a bit more about some of the projects that Hafsa was helping Sid with. Morgan gave her some advice from what she remembered about high school.

When they got back to the fountain, they sat down and started to eat their sandwiches. A big gust of wind came, spraying them with water from the fountain.

Morgan shook herself and asked if Hafsa would like to move somewhere else.

"It's fine. I actually don't mind water."

"Even after your family was trapped under the lake?" Morgan said without thinking, then winced. "Ugh, sorry, that was super

weird of me to say."

Hafsa laughed it off. "Hey, I wasn't the one under the water. It actually wasn't that scary! The worst part was being away from everyone and not knowing when I'd see them again. My human family too. I couldn't exactly go visit them… I usually spend every summer on the island but not knowing when things would go back to normal was scary. I… I guess that's kind of helping me deal with all this COVID stuff." She looked out at the park, watching the trees sway in the wind. "I'm really grateful for your help, back then and over the past couple years, too. You're a really good friend, Morgan."

She blushed and focused on her banh mi for a minute. "It's nothing. And back then, that wasn't really me at all. I was too busy being terrified of being a werewolf. Ripley and Abigail did the most of it."

"Ripley! I miss that guy. He's coming to visit me at Shimmering Lake this summer, hopefully." She sighed. "Sid too. Gwen keeps asking to visit, but…"

"But what?"

"Well… I don't know if I want her to, honestly. She's said and done some really weird things… I don't know if I want her hanging out with my family."

"Oh? What kind of weird things?"

Hafsa shrank in on herself a bit. "I don't know… She said some stuff about my family that made me uncomfortable the first time we met. She apologized, but… I don't know. I don't want her to say anything in front of them. It's easier if we just hang out at her place instead."

Morgan wanted to ask what Gwen had said, but didn't want to pry. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to," she said instead, "even if Gwen really wants it."

Hafsa put her food down. She was quiet for several moments before asking, "Do Laurie or Cherry ever get upset with you if you don't want to do something with them?"

Morgan was taken aback. She knew she had to handle this carefully. Hafsa was putting a lot of trust in her to be coming to her with this. She kept a neutral face and said, "No, they understand when I need space or when I want to hang out with my other friends. The same goes for them, too. They don't always want to do everything with me. A-and they don't have to."

Hafsa looked pensive. Eventually she said, "Gwen really hates it when me and Sid hang out without her, even though she hangs out with Nebula alone all the time. Sid is free a lot more often than she is, too, because she's got all these extracurriculars and online clubs she's like, moderating or something. Sid and I do homework and stuff together so I drive to his house a lot, but we have to hide it from Gwen most of the time or she'll get really sad. She says we don't like her, and that we're excluding her on purpose, but it isn't about that."

"That's terrible," Morgan murmured. "I'm sorry. That's no way to treat either of you."

Hafsa slowly picked up her smoothie and took a sip. "Does Laurie ever… Does she ever say anything… Weird about you being Mi'kmaw?"

Morgan raised her eyebrows in surprise. "No, never! Why?"

Hafsa didn't answer for a moment, opening her mouth to say something but thinking better and turning away.

"Did Gwen say something about you being…?"

"Y-yeah, but it was a long time ago. She made a big deal about me being Muslim and being brown because I'm a catfolk and like, didn't know the difference between Arab and Arabic." She

sighed. "When she… Kind of apologized recently, I pointed that out as like, I guess a joke, and she just looked at me like," she swiped a hand in front of her face, staring blankly ahead. "She did not get it at all."

"Wow, that's messed up," Morgan said.

Hafsa pursed her lips. She went on, "It feels like she doesn't even like me most of the time. It's like she only wants to be with Sid. Even Nebula comes second to Sid like all the time. And if I can be really honest? I don't know if I like her either. She's always saying something weird or offensive… Like one time she said she doesn't even know if she's into guys, and when Sid got upset about that because, obviously, she was like, oh you're my exception so it's fine. It hurt my feelings too, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want to make her cry. And I don't expect her to understand that even though I'm a girl, being a lion, not a lioness, is still an important part of who I am."

"That's…" Morgan tried not to say anything rude, but it was hard. "That's really not okay, Hafsa. You don't deserve that."

Her face slowly hardened. "You're right. I don't."

"Laurie, Cherry, and I sometimes have arguments. We don't always get along. But we're always here for each other. We're never cruel to each other. And… And Laurie has never said anything like that to me or Cherry. That isn't okay."

Hafsa didn't say anything for a few minutes, finishing her banh mi. When she was done, she asked what life was like living with her girlfriends.

Morgan smiled, tucking this conversation away in her mind. She wasn't going to forget about this, but it was clear that Hafsa was done talking about it for now. She told her about their sacred shared breakfasts, movie nights, sharing their makeshift big bed, making art together, driving around in Cherry's VW

bus… Even boring everyday things like Walmart runs were precious now.

"Wow, you've got a perfect life, huh?" Hafsa said wistfully.

"Oh, it's by no means perfect," she said with a soft chuckle. "Money's hard almost all the time, even with Laurie's family helping with some expenses. Cherry and Laurie have steady jobs, but I've always had a hard time staying employed. We've had some really tight months, especially in the winter, and the start of COVID was really rough on us. We're always there for each other, though. We're a team."

"It's crazy how different our lives are. You moved out when you were my age, right?"

She nodded.

"I couldn't imagine living on my own right now. Even if Sid was there, I couldn't do it… Working and going to school, worrying about rent and bills and money for food… I'd just move back to Shimmering Lake full time."

She breathed a short laugh. "It was kind of crazy to move out so young, but there wasn't really a choice. Laurie had to get out of there. So did I, really. I could have stayed with Pa and Trace, but I think I would have regressed badly after Mommy left. The move was a great way to get a fresh start, even if it was by force. I won't lie and say it's been easy, but it was what we needed. And Cherry has been so wonderful to us both. She made a big sacrifice, moving out with us. We wouldn't have been able to make it work without her." She smiled, looking down and thinking about her wonderful girlfriends. "Laurie, too… She puts herself through a lot of bullshit to get the help we need from her parents. We're really hoping we can handle things by ourselves soon. It helps that we're not in school anymore."

"I'm glad you've got them," Hafsa said. "It sounds like you

three are really happy together."

"We are. I can't imagine my life without them."

Hafsa's smile was bittersweet. "I hope I can be as happy as you three are, someday."

Morgan titled her head again, gazing at her young friend. The need to protect her surged in her chest. She reached across the space between them to squeeze her shoulder affectionately. "You will be, Hafsa. I believe that. I really do."

A Warm Meal

"Alright, Ripley," Jason said, pulling a tray of baked potatoes out of the oven. "Ring the bell. First round of baked tatoes is done."

Ripley hustled to the service window, a cutout of the log wall of Jason's cabin's kitchen, and pulled the string to ring the brass bell hanging from the ceiling.

The snow was coming down intensely, and Jason, Abigail, and Ripley were safely inside and hard at work. There were about ten people taking shelter in Jason's cabin, and they needed a good, warm meal to beat back the December chill. Jason had called on Abigail, who was able to bring tons of fresh milk, eggs, and meat from her family farm, and Ripley, who had been driving around nearby and was happy to lend a hand, leaving his dads at their hotel.

The first hungry visitors to show up to the window was the orc couple who were backpacking through the North American regions of Silent Woods that weren't very far from the Outside world. The storm had forced them to seek shelter here, and they were sleeping in one of Jason's guest rooms, built specifically for this purpose.

Ripley asked how they were doing as he served them each a loaded baked potato, a bowl of cream of leek soup, and a glass of cranberry juice.

"We're quite well," the husband answered with a smile. "The room is very comfortable and this food smells wonderful."

The wife nodded, tossing her braid over her shoulder. "We haven't slept somewhere so nice in many months," she said with a chuckle. "Our bedrolls have seen better days."

Jason looked up from where he was prepping the next batch of baked potatoes at the counter beside the window. "I've got a couple extras in my storage closet. You're welcome to them, if they're the right size."

"Oh, there's no need," the husband said. "We'll get by."

"I insist. They're not getting any use here."

Holding her tray on one arm, the wife placed her free hand over her heart. "You are so kind, Jason. Thank you."

"My pleasure. The closet is that door between your room and where the Richardsons are staying."

Behind Jason, Abigail was very busy. She opened the industrial fridge to grab a jug of milk from her farm, as well as three eggs she'd brought, too. She cracked them into a bowl she'd left on the counter beside where Jason was working, adding the milk and beating it all together. She turned and poured it into the pan that had been heating up with melted butter on the gas stove by the fridge. She gave the soup a stir, then went back to the fridge to grab some bacon to fry up as well.

She was cooking for a vixen whose den had been completely snowed in. She had been too exhausted to dig a new den in this blizzard, so she'd come to Jason's for refuge. His door was always open to any person, humanoid or animal, and everyone in the area knew it.

While the omelette and bacon were cooking, she warmed up some frozen berries from Jason's huge chest freezer. Then she poured a shallow bowl of water for the fox and came out of the

kitchen to deliver it personally. She was sitting on the plush rug that covered the floor beside Jason's large, soft sectional couch, which sat in the middle of the room, facing the kitchen window. There was a coffee table by the couch, and beyond it, a dining table with room for six.

Abigail crouched down beside the coffee table, placing the dish of water on the ground where the fox could reach it. "Here's some fresh water for you, ma'am. Your meal is almost ready."

The vixen dipped her head gratefully, lapping up the water.

Abigail went back to work, politely stepping around Mr. Richardson, the father of the human family from Kentsville whose heat had gone out. There was a problem with the pipes that connected their home to the town's central tower, feeding them with dragonfire, so they were living here until the storm was over and the pipes could be repaired.

He gave her a nod and said, "Thank you for all your help," as he made his way back to the guest room to bring dinner to his wife, child, and mother.

The door to the third guest room opened and out came a tall, elderly Black man with long locs. "Did I hear the dinner bell?" he asked in a soft, musical voice.

Ripley grinned. "Yes sir! Baked potatoes are ready."

"Good, good." He hobbled his way over as Ripley plated his dinner.

He was one of three people here who had been born in Silent Woods but decided to settle in the Outside world at one point or another, much like Hafsa and Shebal's human family. However, with the pandemic shutting the world down and putting them in danger, they'd decided to return to Silent Woods temporarily. As the second year mark approached, the three of them— the other two being a werewolf and an elf who were resting on the

couch— were left in flux, so Jason was giving them some help as they decided where to go from here.

Once everyone had gotten their first helpings of food, the three cooks took a break to eat a baked potato each as the next batch was in the oven. Jason wanted to ensure anyone who wanted seconds could have something, but he also needed to have some extra food ready to give out in case he got any knocks on the door.

As Jason was cracking open a can of Strongbow, he heard just that: someone was knocking.

"The grind never stops," Abigail remarked as he got up with a grunt.

"Don't I know it," he said, lumbering out of the kitchen and to the front door.

When he opened it, though, he let out a hearty laugh and opened his arms for a hug. There was a flash of light and Shebal stepped inside, dropping a heavy bag onto the floor and embracing his friend.

"What brings you all this way in a blizzard?" Jason asked.

"I thought you could use some supplies. Ice fishing has been good, so we've got plenty of extra fish."

There was a cheer from all the refugees and travelers. Even the fox yipped in excitement.

"Thank you, Shebal!" Ripley called from the kitchen.

He smiled and waved. "It's no problem!"

Jason clapped him on the back. "Come eat with us. You should recharge after trudging through all that snow."

"Oh, it's alright, there's others who need it more than me."

"Nonsense," the female orc spoke up. "There's plenty. Besides, you just replenished the stores. You've got nothing to worry about, taking food."

"Well, I am pretty hungry…"
"Take a seat, buddy. There's a warm meal for everyone, here."

Escaping The Noise

"I can't take it anymore. I'm going to— I'm going to turn into a wolf, piss into a Super Soaker, and shoot it into their stupid fucking trucks. And— and then it'll freeze, and they'll never get the smell out of the upholstery."

Cherry wasn't even fazed by how out of character that was. They were all so extremely exhausted. It had been weeks— two weeks exactly, they'd counted every excruciating day— since the trucker convoy had descended upon the city, effectively trapping people in their homes and subjecting them to constant, unending, dysregulating noise. The government had only just declared a state of emergency, and it felt like very little, if anything at all, was being done to stop the occupation.

Morgan, who had been sitting at her desk with her head in her hands, jumped when her phone buzzed. She grabbed it with a sigh, hammering in her password to check who had texted her. Her face lit up as she read the text, then she turned to her girlfriends, who were sitting in her bean bag chair in the other corner of the small room.

Cherry looked up, caressing Laurie's head as the smaller girl lay against her chest. "What's up, sweetie?"

"Do you— wait," she thought for a moment, then slowly signed as she spoke, making sure Laurie was watching, {{Do you

want to go to Gwen's house with Hafsa?⦚

Laurie furrowed her brows, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "What?"

Morgan signed again, speaking loudly and clearly.

Laurie had taken out the sound processing part of her hearing aids so the cacophony was a little less grating, which had put more pressure on her to learn sign language. She still wasn't great at it, because her family had never bothered teaching her, and it didn't help that Morgan was only just starting to learn, too.

When she couldn't understand it a couple more times, Morgan just showed her the text from Hafsa, saying she was going to spend a few days at Gwen's to escape the noise, and they'd be welcome to join her.

"Absolutely! Yes! When can we leave?"

"Today! She can pick us up in a couple hours." Morgan showed Laurie the other text saying so.

"Let's pack, then," Laurie exclaimed, clambering to her feet.

"I cannot wait to get out of here," Cherry said, accepting Laurie's hand to help her stand.

The three of them wasted no time packing everything they'd need for a weekend away. Hafsa was waiting for them on the curb in a flash, sitting in her old Toyota Corolla. The sounds of cars honking and trucks bellowing mocked them as they ran to the getaway cars. Morgan hopped in the front seat while Cherry and Laurie took Cherry's car; Morgan and Laurie would text to make sure they didn't lose each other as Hafsa led them to Gwen's.

Hafsa's knuckles were white from how hard she was gripping the wheel.

"It must be stressful driving in all this," Morgan commented.

"You have no idea. I… I don't even wanna talk about it. Let's

just get out of here."

Morgan hunkered down and fired off instructions to Laurie, navigating for Cherry, as Hafsa weaved down side streets and found her way onto the highway.

As soon as she was beyond the city limits, with not a trucker in sight, she got Morgan to get on the phone with Laurie, putting them both on speakerphone.

"I'm going to take a secret exit," Hafsa explained. "I need to make sure you always have sight of my car, or else you won't follow me and I'll have to come back and get you."

"What do you mean, a secret exit?" Laurie asked.

"There's exits that go into Silent Woods. It'll make our drive take like, half an hour, which is way shorter than it would take on the Outside roads."

Laurie laughed incredulously. "Silent Woods has everything, doesn't it?"

Hafsa cracked a bit of a smile, but she was still tense, hunched over and staring ahead. "Pretty much."

Morgan watched as Hafsa's eyes caught something on the side of the road. She put her turn signal on and started to merge into a lane that appeared before Morgan's eyes, leading towards an off ramp that materialized like fake water on the highway.

"Are you still seeing me?"

"… Sort of? You're merging, but it looks almost like you passed through the car ahead of you."

"Like, not really, but—" Cherry added, but couldn't finish her sentence. "That makes no sense."

"Are you seeing the exit?" Hafsa asked.

"Not really." Then, "Wait. Yes. I see the ramp."

"Keep your eyes on my car. Merge into the new lane. Don't overthink it, just let it happen. Trust the Woods."

Morgan watched with childlike wonder as the trees on the sides of the road grew taller, the evergreens fuller and brighter, the bare oaks and maples reaching higher into the gray sky. Soft lights fluttered between the branches, and pinkish flowers grew up from the scant snow.

"You still with us?"

"Yes!" Laurie said with a soft gasp. "The lights… Wow, this place is is pretty…"

Hafsa started to relax, straightening up and letting out a breath. "It's awesome, isn't it?"

"It really is," Morgan whispered.

They stayed on the phone for the rest of the drive through Silent Woods, making sure they didn't lose each other where it would be much harder to be found again. The landscape didn't change much more than it already had, but Morgan's eyes were glued to the window the whole time. After about fifteen minutes, she began to catch glimpses of these shadowy, doglike forms that ran alongside the car, dipping between trees and charging through the slushy ditches. She didn't know if it was just her eyes playing tricks on her. After all, she'd often imagined creatures like these running alongside her parents' car. But maybe here, where anything could happen, they were real, living animals.

She almost asked Hafsa about them, but decided she didn't want to break the illusion, if it were one. She owed her inner child that much.

When both cars had safely exited Silent Woods, they found themselves barely a kilometer from Gwen's house. Hafsa led them down the road to her driveway, getting Morgan to text the group chat that they'd arrived.

Gwen came running out of the house in slippers to meet them.

Henry followed her slowly, not shivering even though he was only wearing a jean jacket over his thin t shirt. He helped the girls carry their bags in as Gwen badgered Hafsa about how she and Sid were doing while Hafsa responded in two word sentences.

"Maybe Hafsa wants to get inside and unpack her things first," Cherry suggested gently.

Gwen's eyes flashed and she frowned deeply, saying, "I'm just asking my girlfriend how she's doing," but she offered to take one of Hafsa's bags in for her.

When they had brought all their things into the house, Morgan and her girlfriends started setting up on the couch with Hafsa and Henry's help.

Aileen made them a round of hot chocolate. When she brought their mugs to the coffee table, she asked Hafsa if her parents were really okay staying in Ottawa.

"They're in Kentsville with my aunt," she said.

"Where's that?"

"Oh, um," she glanced at Gwen. Did her parents know about Silent Woods yet? "Maybe like a three hour drive from Ottawa."

"Wow, that's pretty far. Do your see your aunt often?"

"Yeah! All my aunts and uncles and cousins come into town for Eid. Or we go to their places."

Gwen grabbed Hafsa's arm. "Want to come get comfortable in my room?"

"Sure," Hafsa said, ignoring a teasing grin and hushed comment from Henry.

"I hope you three will be okay with sleeping in the living room," Aileen said as the two teenagers went down the hall and up the spiral staircase. She was back in the kitchen now, unloading the dishwasher.

"It's perfectly okay," Cherry said. "We sleep in the living room when we visit my family, too. Thank you for letting us stay here. There wasn't any room at Mom and Dad's, since my cousins were all staying there too."

"Oh, don't mention it. It's so terrible what they're doing in Ottawa." Aileen clicked her tongue and shook her head. "I can't believe you've lasted this long in all that noise. I had a hard enough time with Cole keeping me up all night when he was a baby!"

Cherry groaned, starting to unpack her bedding to make a bed on the couch. "I don't even wanna think about it."

"How is Cole doing?" Laurie asked, helping Cherry as Morgan took their toiletries to the bathroom.

"He's doing well," Aileen said, but seemed a bit troubled. "He's shaping up to be a very picky eater, and it's been hard to give him opportunities to socialize with kids his age, but my sister Rachel's daughter, Enid, and her neighbor's two little boys, are about his age. He and Alan are visiting them now, in Kingston."

"I can't imagine how hard it's been to raise such a young child in this pandemic," Laurie said.

"Yeah," Cherry added. "I've been seeing it in my little cousins, too. It's been such a challenge with them… It's going to shape all these kids' lives forever."

Aileen was quiet for a bit before she said, "We've all got to do our best to make sure they still get the best chance they can at a good, happy, healthy life. Forget a normal life— what's normal, anyway?" She turned around and smiled warmly at Henry, who had wordlessly begun helping the girls set up their space. "None of my children have had a normal start to life, but that doesn't mean they can't have as good a life as anyone else."

In the hallway, Morgan had to pause for a moment to wipe

away silent tears, feeling like Aileen— or the figure of a mother who loved her, not necessarily Aileen or anyone else— was saying that to her, too. She gave herself time to collect herself before coming back into the living room.

That evening, once the four of them had settled down, Aileen and Henry started cooking venison burgers from a deer Henry had hunted. Hafsa was offered a halal beef burger instead, but she declined, saying that when she stayed with her other family members who were not Muslim, they hunted for most of their meat, so she'd eaten plenty of venison in her life, and even other animals like moose, rabbit, elk, and bison.

"I know the way he kills the animal is respectful," she added. "We've talked about hunting a lot, actually! I give him all my tips."

Henry rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. "Like I need them."

"You do! I saw what happened when you tried to skin th—"

"Don't bring that up," Gwen whined. "That was so gross."

Hafsa giggled, but Gwen looked actually upset; she put on her jacket and boots and went out into the backyard.

Morgan stared after her for a moment before asking Hafsa and Henry to tell the story.

Aileen grimaced. "I'm with Gwen on this one, I don't want to hear about anything that gross while I'm making dinner, thank you!"

"Can I help with anything?" Laurie asked. "I feel bad just sitting around."

Aileen doled out chores to Laurie, with Cherry and Hafsa not far behind. She didn't have anything for Morgan to do, so she was free to do whatever she wanted. She was thinking about going out back to check on Gwen, but Ava and Genette joined them before she could go get her coat.

"Hey," Ava stifled a yawn, "sorry we didn't come down earlier."

Genette's face turned red as Henry asked what they'd been doing.

"Leave your sister alone, Henry," Aileen chided with a chuckle.

Ava looped her arm through Genette's and murmured, "Let's go out front?"

Genette patted the front pocket of her black skinny jeans and nodded.

To Aileen, Ava said, "We're just gonna get some fresh air, then we'll be back to help with dinner."

"Oh, I have plenty of help from your friends. It's okay."

Morgan decided she should go check on Gwen, especially since she wasn't invited out front with Ava and Genette, so she grabbed her things and went out onto the back porch. She walked down the stairs and followed Gwen's smaller footsteps through the snow, all the way to the dock, where she was standing, looking out over the frozen lake.

"Hey," she said, putting her hands in her pockets. "You okay?"

Gwen turned around. Morgan couldn't read her expression, but she shrugged and said, "I'm fine. Sorry for storming out."

"It's okay. I get overwhelmed and need to leave sometimes, too."

She looked back out at the lake. "… It's comforting to be out here alone."

"It's very pretty. You're lucky to live here, so close to nature."

"Sometimes it doesn't feel lucky."

"You used to live in the city, right?"

She nodded.

"I used to live in the suburbs, now I'm downtown. That's been quite the change. I can't imagine how it's been for you."

Gwen didn't say anything else for a few minutes, but it didn't

take her long to start heading back in. Morgan was on her heels, feeling better for having helped her.

Together, everyone sat at the dining table, overlooking the backyard, to eat dinner. Morgan tried to focus on the food, which was delicious, but the smell of cigarettes was so strong, she could hardly taste her burger and iced tea. She didn't want to be impolite, so she did her best not to sneeze or cough.

"Hafsa," Gwen said after taking a long sip of her Pepsi, "why don't you take your hijab off? It's only us."

Hafsa paused as she lifted her burger to take a bite. She shot Gwen a sidelong glance, then laughed a little bit, but didn't give her any better answer.

"I'm being serious," she said. "You've taken it off on call with me and Sid before, you can get comfortable if you want."

"Gwen," Aileen started, but Hafsa beat her to it.

"I am comfortable already," she said. "What makes you think I'm not?"

Her cheeks turned dark red and she stammered, "Well, I wouldn't be happy wearing something around my head all day."

"I am, though. I'm not you."

"I was just trying to be considerate."

"You weren't being considerate at all," Hafsa snapped.

"She's just being nice," Henry said. "Do you not want people to be nice to you?"

Genette shot him a fiery glare.

"Hey now, Henry, we don't need to be getting angry," Aileen said gently. "Gwen, remember how we talked about assuming what other people need?"

Gwen looked mortified, staring down at her plate. "Yes."

Hafsa somehow looked even more embarrassed than she did.

Ava excused herself to go to the bathroom, and as she walked

behind Morgan, she caught a strong whiff of cigarette smoke. Morgan had to stop herself from reacting; there was enough drama at the dinner table without anyone knowing Ava was smoking cigarettes.

The rest of the meal went by okay, if not a little awkwardly. Once everyone had finished eating, Aileen went to her room to read, saying goodnight to everyone. Henry offered Laurie, Morgan, and Cherry some of his beers after Genette and Ava stepped outside again— definitely to smoke— and Gwen sulked while loading the dishwasher.

"Oh, no, I'm okay, thank you," Morgan said. "I don't really drink."

Cherry and Laurie were happy to accept, though, leaving Morgan with Hafsa at the dining table.

"Do you wanna watch a movie with us?" Laurie asked, taking a seat on the couch as Henry got her a beer.

"I was going to ask Hafsa if she wanted to watch a movie with me," Gwen called from the kitchen.

"Okay," Hafsa said, but she didn't sound entirely eager. "Can Morgan come too?"

Gwen looked a little put out, but said, "Sure."

Ava and Genette came back in, and the smell of cigarettes was renewed, along with a faint floral scent.

"Why are we acting like we can't all watch a movie together just because I'm drinking?" Henry snorted. "I drink around you all the time."

"We're watching a movie together?" Genette asked.

Cherry laughed. "I guess we are!"

Henry held up another can of beer and whispered, looking at Ava, "Mom's not here."

Ava smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

Genette walked over and got her own drink from the fridge.

"What, too good for one of mine?"

"Yes, I am."

Ava, Hafsa, and Cherry laughed at that. Even Morgan, who was feeling more and more overwhelmed by the undertones of tension in the room, chuckled.

Everyone sat on the couch, careful of the three girls' things. Henry put on a movie that he picked out: *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*. Morgan was excited, she loved that movie, but she couldn't really pay attention. She was getting distracted by the weirdness happening around her.

On one side, Gwen spoke in a loud whisper to Hafsa. "I just don't get why he didn't want to come."

"It isn't too loud to function where he is," Hafsa said wearily.

"So you only came over to get away from the truckers?"

"No? You invited me."

"Don't you want to be around me?"

"Of course I do, Gwen, I'm your girlfriend." She flashed her an angry look. "What about Nebula? Are you upset with them for not being here?"

"Nebula is in California right now," Gwen huffed.

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"It's the same thing," she hissed.

Gwen turned herself away, crossing her arms. "Whatever."

"Hey," Laurie said, turning to Gwen suddenly. "You like to knit, right?"

"Yes," she sniffed. "I knit, crochet, and embroider. I'm learning needle felting, too."

Laurie launched into a conversation about crocheting, giving Hafsa some respite.

On her other side, Morgan was now overhearing Ava and Genette. They were whispering, barely audible over the movie, but Morgan's sensitive ears picked their words up with ease.

"If that isn't it, what's wrong?" Ava was saying as Morgan tuned in.

Genette didn't verbally respond at first, and Morgan missed the gesture she made. "Obviously."

"How was I supposed to know it wasn't that I took the last one?"

"When have I ever had a problem with that? I always just buy more." She sighed. "That was days ago, too. Can you drop it?"

"I'm sorry I'm costing you so much money."

"That isn't a problem." Genette put her hand on Ava's knee. "I promise. You know how I feel about…"

"It isn't like it used to be, though."

"I…" She trailed off for a long time, then took her phone out and started typing.

Morgan caught Henry's name, but didn't want to snoop, so she took out her phone, too, to distract herself. She wondered what Ava meant… It isn't like it used to be, between her and Henry?

"None of you are even watching the movie," Henry complained loudly.

"I am," Cherry and Hafsa said at the same time.

He lifted his beer. "You two are real. Everyone else here sucks."

Genette rolled her eyes and Ava shifted her leg away from her.

When the movie was over, everyone but the three girlfriends cleared out of the ground floor to let them get some sleep. Cherry took one side of the sectional, while Laurie cuddled

up with Morgan on the other side. It took her a long time to fall asleep after absorbing all of that anxiety, but eventually, Morgan dreamed of running through the forest, two wolf pups at her side.

* * *

Ava woke up around the time that Henry did. She didn't need to be awake with the sunrise, but she'd gotten used to having coffee with Henry before he biked to work at the bait shop nearby. She slipped out of bed, on quiet feet so she wouldn't wake Genette, grabbing a cigarette, lighter, and perfume from her jacket on the floor. Creeping out of her bedroom, she hurried to the bathroom before padding downstairs. Henry was already down there. He had made them both their preferred coffee, and was leaning on the kitchen counter, sipping his.

She gave him a little wave and whispered, "Good morning."

He dipped his head. "How'd you sleep?"

She tilted her hand back and forth.

He nodded towards the front door. "Let's step outside."

On the front lawn, standing in the several inches of fresh snow that had fallen overnight, Ava was relieved to not be hovering while Morgan, Cherry, and Laurie slept.

"It's getting overwhelming in there with all those people, huh?" Henry commented, slugging down his coffee.

"No kidding. I almost wish we were in lockdown again so they'd leave."

Henry snorted a laugh. "Don't wish for bad luck."

"And stop knocking on wood," Ava whispered, quoting a John Prine lyric.

Henry didn't acknowledge it. "I wouldn't want to be in

Ottawa right now." He sighed, looked into his empty coffee mug, and passed it to Ava. "Bring this in for me, will you? I don't want to bike in this. I'd better start knocking on doors for a ride."

"I could wake up Hafsa or someone," Ava offered.

"No, it's fine. Wouldn't want to bother them."

It was still so weird seeing Henry like this. Even though it hadn't been that long since he was doing much worse, his constant growth, change, and maturity took Ava by surprise some days.

"Don't let coffee and a cigarette be your breakfast," Henry said, watching her light up. "There's hash browns in the fridge."

"I'll eat," Ava reassured him. "Get to work safe. Don't get kidnapped."

He laughed. "I'm a bit old for that."

Watching him walk down the driveway, Ava's stomach twisted. Things used to be really bad between them. When COVID hit not even a year after the incident at camp, the house had been so toxic for them all, being trapped together more than ever. But over this past year and a half, he'd made so much progress. He didn't resent Cole anymore— none of them did— and he called Aileen Mom. It was almost like she had a whole new big brother… Even though sometimes the old Henry would shine through, and it'd scare her all over again.

While Henry was improving, though, Ava felt herself getting worse. She was smoking and drinking because Genette did, not that it was her fault. She liked how it made her feel, too. She just hated having to sneak around behind her parents' backs, after all they'd done for her… And she couldn't help but feel like she was dragging Genette down with her.

They'd been together almost three years, and it had been

filled with ups and downs. Genette was very hotheaded and protective, both of herself and of Ava, and that had continued to cause issues between her and Henry, even though Ava had begun to move on. Ava knew she was only doing it because she loved her, but she couldn't help but feel like it wasn't fair. It's not like Henry had done all those horrible things to Genette. And she could tell Genette didn't like Gwen sometimes, either.

Gwen was… Well. Gwen was Gwen. She'd always been nervous and sensitive, and not really able to understand when she was crossing a boundary. But it hurt that her own girlfriend didn't like either of her siblings, the people who she'd known the longest, who had stuck with her the longest.

Rubbing her cigarette out in the snow, she dropped the butt into the coffee can next to the front door and spritzed herself with the mild perfume Genette let her use to cover up the smell. She stepped inside and immediately caught the delicious smells of cheesy omelettes, bacon, and hash browns.

Morgan looked up from where she was cooking at the stove and said, "Hey, good morning."

"Morning," Ava said curtly. "Let me know when you're done in the kitchen so I can make breakfast."

She titled her head and smiled. "I made enough for everyone. I can make you something different if you'd like."

She flushed with embarrassment. "Oh, thanks. I'll just grab a plate then."

Morgan called Laurie and Cherry over from where they'd been cuddling on the couch. The four of them served themselves and sat at the dining table to eat together. Cherry and Laurie asked Ava questions about her school, if she was working yet, and what she wanted to do after high school.

She stumbled through her answers: school was fine, but she

couldn't wait to leave; she was going to apply at the gas station near Henry's work once she'd graduated and gotten the old family car for herself; and she wasn't sure what she wanted to do after, maybe she'd go into parks services like Alan. "I want to do something with nature, for sure."

Laurie looked thoughtful. "I wish I had any relevant suggestions… Everything I know is way closer to Ottawa. There's the Experimental Farm, Gatineau Parks…"

"Camp Fortune!" Cherry added, excited. "The dirt bike trails there are so cool. Arty took me up there once or twice with his friends. You seem like the kind of girl who'd be into dirt bikes, have you ever been up there?"

She shook her head. "I've borrowed Henry's bike a couple times, but I don't have my own. I like taking the Skidoo out on the ice though. We're lucky that our lake still freezes enough here."

"That sounds like so much fun," Laurie said. "My family was not very outdoorsy. It's taken me some getting used to, but I go hiking on King Mountain sometimes, or do the Pink Lake circuit. They're not far from where we live, and Cherry and Morgan love it."

Morgan smiled sheepishly. "Sometimes there aren't many people around, so I get to transform."

Ava paused for a moment, then said, "Right, you're a werewolf, aren't you?"

She nodded. "There's not a lot of opportunities to stretch my legs downtown. I have a friend who's a werewolf too, sometimes we play at a dog park when it's late, but it was easier in the suburbs. There was a little patch of forest really close to my house, I'd go there all the time."

Ava nodded, but looked distant. "I'd let you transform here,

but Alan and Aileen don't really… Know about that stuff. We didn't tell them."

Morgan smiled and waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound like I was asking for that. My parents don't know either."

"… How are you a werewolf then?"

"I got bit as a kid," she explained. "I told them it was a dog."

"They've never caught you… Transforming?"

She chuckled. "They almost did a few times!"

Cherry grabbed her upper arm and said, leaning closer to her, "Remember when Charlene dropped by with the twins without calling first? And you were in full wolf mode on the couch?"

She covered her blushing face, giggling. "That was so embarrassing! Sometimes I wish I was magic like Hafsa, so I could have clothes on when I changed back, instead of having to scramble to get changed when someone rings the doorbell."

"That's why I've always got something on hand for you to wear, my love," Laurie said, kissing her shoulder.

Ava felt a pang of jealousy, but she couldn't place why.

The others came out of their rooms soon after, and Morgan made everyone more breakfast, even though Aileen offered to take over.

Laurie started working on her crocheting on the couch, and called Gwen over to join her when she'd finished eating.

"Can I join you two?" Aileen asked. "I need to finish my sister's scarf."

"Sure," Laurie said with a smile.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Cherry asked Morgan and Ava once they'd finished loading the dishwasher.

Morgan grinned and nodded. "It'd be great to stretch my legs."

Cherry smiled and ruffled her hair playfully.

Ava looked to Genette, who checked her phone with a frown before shrugging.

"You're invited too, Genette," Cherry clarified as the two girls headed to the door to get bundled up.

"Yeah, we'll come," she said, sounding tired.

Ava's stomach twisted in panic. What was Genette upset about?

"Can I come too?" Hafsa asked as she hurried down the hallway from the bathroom.

"I wanted to you stay with me," Gwen whined. "I want to make something for you. I need you to model it."

Hafsa glanced at Morgan, but said, stilted, "Okay, I'll stay."

Outside, the four of them made their way down the driveway and started heading up the road. Cherry got Ava to lead, since she knew the area, but she wasn't really paying attention to the walk. She had to figure out what was going on in Genette's head.

"Did you sleep okay last night?" she asked.

"Hmm? Yeah," Genette said, digging around in her pockets. "Where's my lighter?"

"Oh, here," Ava handed it to her, "sorry."

"It's okay." She pulled out a cigarette and lit it, then passed it to Ava.

She took it. "Thanks."

Behind them, Morgan trotted into the middle of the road so the smoke wasn't blowing back into her face. Cherry followed her.

Ava quickly glanced at Genette, who looked pissed. "We don't have to smoke if you don't want us to," she said to the two older girls.

Cherry waved her hand dismissively. "Don't let us stop you."

"I'm just sensitive to the smoke," Morgan said. "I have a really good sense of smell."

"Maybe we shouldn't have come at all," Ava mumbled to Genette. "We can go back if you want."

She shot her a look. "What's up with you today?"

Her eyes opened wide and she lowered the cigarette, letting it burn out at her side. "What do you mean?"

"You've been so on edge since I got here," Genette whispered. "It feels like you're trying to start a fight."

"What? No, I'm not," she said, her voice shaking. "I— You seem on edge! I'm trying to help you."

"By doing what? I wanted to get out of the house to get away from Henry."

"He isn't even home right now," Ava snapped. She sighed loudly and took a quick, harsh drag of the cigarette. "Is that what this is about? Henry?"

"What else would it be about?"

"You know he's changed."

"Maybe to you he has."

Ava crossed her arms and walked a few steps forward.

Genette put her own unlit cigarette back into her pocket. "Not that there's an 'it' for anything to be about. I am literally fine."

She turned around with a fierce glare. "You are literally not!" She gestured to her, the cigarette ashing from the movement. "Look at you. You're upset!"

"Yes, I'm upset because you're yelling at me and putting words in my mouth!"

"I'm not yelling!"

"What do you call that, then?"

Ava's eyes focused on Morgan and Cherry's concerned faces over Genette's shoulder. The couple were holding hands and exchanging soft words. Her anger flared up inside her chest, sparked by jealousy and shame. How could they be so sweet to each other but she and Genette were fighting, right in front of these people's faces?

"I'm going back," Genette said. "I need a minute."

Ava dropped her unfinished cigarette on the ground and stomped it out, grinding it into the snow with her boot. Tears burned at her eyes and she held her breath so she wouldn't sob. She didn't need more reasons to feel stupid right now.

Cherry quietly approached her, making her feel like a panicked zoo animal. She reached out, saying, "Hey, you okay, Ava?"

"No, obviously not," Ava snapped. Half of her regretted it, and that half made her even more angry. She wanted to storm away, but she was rooted to the spot.

"You're allowed to feel however you feel," Cherry said. "It's okay to not be okay."

Morgan came up beside her girlfriend, threading their fingers together. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She was silent for a minute— stunned, angry, and annoyed that these two were even there— but it didn't take long for it all to burst out. "I just— I don't know what to do! I want to help her, but she pushes me away every time. I just want her to be happy." A sob surprised her, and she pressed a hand over her mouth, hugging herself with her other arm. "I love her so much," she hiccuped out. "It hurts sometimes."

"I understand what you mean," Morgan said softly. "It hurts me really badly too to see Cherry or Laurie upset. Especially when I can't do anything to help it. But sometimes, all I have to

do to help is be there."

Cherry nodded, smiling, her eyes warm and not judgmental. "It helps me a lot to just be with my girl." She leaned into Morgan's shoulder for a moment. "Maybe that's all Genette needs from you, too… Company, not a therapist."

"You never have to be a therapist to your friends," Morgan said, "or to your girlfriend. It isn't easy, when you have a big heart, but sometimes all you have to do is listen. She'll tell you what she needs, if you let her."

Ava was quiet for a few moments more, wiping her face with the back of her hand. She didn't know what she had expected them to say, but it wasn't this. Part of her still wanted to be angry with them, but… She just couldn't be. "Thank you."

"Hey, don't worry about it," Morgan said with a smile.

"Do you want a hug?" Cherry offered.

She nodded pitifully before she could stop herself. "Thank you," she mumbled. "Thank you."

The three of them hugged in the middle of the road, filling her with warmth as a slow snow began to fall.

When they got back home, Genette was standing awkwardly in the kitchen, drinking hot chocolate with Aileen. She stared at Ava for a moment, but when Ava gave her a tight smile and wave, she sagged inward, putting her mug down and hurrying over to give her a hug.

"I'm sorry," Ava murmured into her shoulder.

"Don't be. I'm sorry too."

"It's okay," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Do you wanna go to my room and, um," she pulled back to look her in the eyes, "just, like, talk about it?"

Genette cracked a small smile, her eyes crinkling. "Yeah, let's

do that."

Ava's heart could've soared right out of her chest.

* * *

When Hafsa woke up on the 13th, Gwen was already awake, perched on the edge of the bed and furiously texting. Hafsa didn't want to deal with anything until she went to the bathroom, so she dragged herself out of bed and slunk out of the room. When she came back, Gwen was glowering at her.

"What's up?" Hafsa asked, unable to mask her tiredness.

"I'm just upset," she said, turning away. She sat still for a moment, then said, "I'm going to get dressed now."

"Okay."

"Can you turn around?"

Hafsa blinked in surprise. Gwen hadn't asked her to do that since they first started dating. She nodded and turned to face the door.

When Gwen was ready, they went downstairs for breakfast, but she was glued to her phone the whole time. Aileen had to tell her to not text so much while they're all eating together, which neither of them were happy about, but at least Henry wasn't there to make any uncomfortable comments. Things were tense after that, and only got worse as Hafsa started to chat with Morgan, Laurie, and Cherry: the three girls were hoping to go back home today, and wanted to know if Hafsa could drive back with them.

"You're leaving already?" Gwen said, distressed, reaching for Hafsa's hand.

"Well… I was thinking of going to Kentsville to see my family, anyway," Hafsa said, limply letting Gwen intertwine

their fingers.

"What? Why?"

"It's been a long time since I've been there. I want to visit my aunt."

Before Gwen could respond, Aileen said to the three girlfriends, "You're welcome to stay longer, if you want. I haven't heard any good news out of Ottawa."

"Thank you, but I'm starting to get homesick," Cherry admitted. "I'm dying to sleep in my own bed."

Aileen laughed lightly. "I don't blame you. But don't feel like you can't come back if it doesn't get better soon."

"We'll take you up on that, if we need to," Morgan promised.

"If you're going to Kentsville, you can't drive them home," Gwen blurted, looking at Hafsa.

"B—" Hafsa began, but Aileen didn't notice and spoke over her.

"I don't mind guiding you back to Ottawa," she said. "It's a long drive, but it'll be a lot longer for Hafsa, having to go back to Kentsville afterwards, too."

Ava perked up. "Do you think I could come along? I need driving practice."

"Of course. Is Genette coming too?"

She shook her head, standing to bring some plates to the kitchen. "I was thinking of doing some chores around the house," she said, "to thank you for letting me stay here."

Aileen smiled. "There's no need for that, Genette. You know you're welcome here anytime."

"I know, but I want to help out. I like cleaning bathrooms and kitchens, so I can get that done for you."

"Oh wow, you do? She's a keeper, Ava."

Ava laughed, but Hafsa thought she sounded nervous. "I

know."

Hafsa broke away from Gwen to bring their plates to the sink, but Gwen followed her like a puppy, practically begging her to go to her room. She didn't know where else they would go, but she didn't say that, and politely went upstairs with her. Clearly something was going on with whoever she was texting. Hafsa didn't need to make it worse, even though it stressed her out when she acted like this.

As soon as the door was closed, Hafsa asked her what was wrong.

She furrowed her brow and turned away.

"Don't try to tell me it's nothing," Hafsa said. She didn't want this to be just another thing brushed under the rug while Gwen got to demand, demand, demand everything from her and Sid.

"Like you even care!" she squeaked.

"I do care, Gwen! That's why I'm asking."

"You don't need to be so mean about it."

She sagged. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Can we just talk?"

"I don't know."

"Why did you bring me up here if you don't want to talk?"

"I— I—" she threw her phone down on the bed and grabbed fistfuls of her hair. "I need help! I don't know what to do!"

Hafsa didn't want to say the wrong thing, so she just quietly sat on the bed, giving her space. She stared at the carpet while Gwen sobbed, slowly pulling less and less on her hair. She let her hands fall into her lap and was still for another few moments before stiffly sitting down. Hafsa wished she could help her, but she never really let her learn how.

Eventually, Gwen handed her her phone without looking at her. "Just read this."

"Um, it's locked…"

She sighed, snatched it back, tapped and scrolled for a minute, then tossed it back at her unceremoniously.

Hafsa pressed her lips together in annoyance as she picked up the phone. It was open to Gwen's Discord private messages with Nebula, starting a couple hours ago, before Hafsa had woken up.

Nebula Rose: Hey I know its late_early for you so idks if eyoull be up right now but we neee to tlwk

gwenners: wdym?????

Nebula Rose: We newd to talk about pur telarionship

gwenners: why rn???? its so late for u too

gwenners: go to bed sillyhead

Nebula Rose: Gwen, im being seroous

Nebula Rose: This is exacty the problm

Nebula Rose: You neber lsiten to me

gwenners: im listening

Nebula Rose: I cant tell uou anyring wuthout you downplating my emtions and makign it into a joke

gwenners: IM LISTNEING

Nebula Rose: Now youre judt yelling at me

Hafsa tried to keep a neutral face, in case Gwen was watching for her reaction, as she read on.

The conversation carried on for hours as they argued, though Gwen's responses were less and less frequent. Nebula didn't think it was fair how often Gwen would brush off anything they brought up, including how they were still upset about how for the first several months of their relationship, she would obsessively make comments about how she didn't know if they were assigned female or male at birth, and that she only stopped when they completely ignored her.

Gwen mostly had continued to brush them off. At first she

was telling them to go to bed, it's too late to be thinking about these things. When that stopped working, she switched to telling them they were being ridiculous, and that none of the things she was doing were really a big deal. She even said that if they were really serious, they'd make an effort to spell things correctly, which was very cruel— Nebula had a disorder that made fine motor skills hard, even Hafsa knew that. That didn't get her anywhere, either, so she did what she always did to her and Sid: spun it back on them, making the problem into how stressful and scary this is for her, and how much she hates when they fight, and how she just wants to be happy with them.

Nebula, unlike Sid and Hafsa, didn't bend. They told her that the only way for them to be happy together was for her to face her flaws and respect them as her partner.

Gwen absolutely lost it.

Hafsa didn't want to read those messages. She looked up at Gwen, trying her hardest to still have a blank face, and asked, "Why did you show me this?"

She turned to her, her face red and her eyes puffy, wet with tears. "I need you to help me," she begged.

Hafsa's heart began thumping in her chest. She subconsciously leaned back. "I— I don't think I can—"

"You need to! You're my girlfriend and Nebula is going to break up with me!"

"They didn't even say that."

"But they will! I know they will," she yanked at her hair and slammed her other fist against her leg, suddenly breaking into sobs.

Sharp, hot panic shot through Hafsa. She stood up, her mouth dry and her eyes wide. She tucked her hands to her chest. "I can't do this, I can't do this, I need to go. I want my parents."

"So you're gonna leave me too?" Gwen's voice shot up an octave.

Hafsa took a step backwards towards the door. Shakily, she said, "What?"

Gwen stood up, her face twisted in panic and sorrow. "You're breaking up with me too?"

Hafsa felt herself shatter, all the way down into the magic that makes her. Backed into a corner, she was caught off guard by the horrible urge to transform and tear her to pieces. Her body ran cold, terrified of that chilling instinct. Why did she have to be so horrible? What was wrong with her?

"Tell me!" Gwen all but screamed at her.

She flinched hard. Steeling herself, she took a sharp breath and said, "No, I'm not leaving you."

Gwen fell onto her, forcing her to steady her, which turned into a hug. Hafsa tried to stop panicking, or to at least not be panicking in a way that Gwen would notice.

"Please, please stay," Gwen begged. "Please don't go home today. I don't think I can be without you right now."

"Okay," Hafsa said faintly.

"Can Sid come over too? I need him."

"I can ask."

Gwen sobbed loudly into her shoulder, thanking her over and over.

Downstairs, the vacuum roared to life.

Hafsa didn't think she could do this. She didn't think Sid coming would help, either. She shoved those feelings down. What choice did she have?

Gwen dug her nails into Hafsa's shoulders, making her wince. "Promise me you won't leave me."

"I won't," she almost hissed. She said she won't already. Can't

she just stop? Can't all this just stop?

"Promise me!"

She tried not to flinch again. She didn't want Gwen to know—to think— to know?— to think she was afraid of her. "I promise," she whispered, desperate. "I promise I won't leave you."

"Thank you," she sobbed out, gripping her harder.

Hafsa didn't know if that was good enough, though. She didn't know if anything would ever be good enough.

Monstr

Barclay and Ronnie had talked about opening their relationship a few times over the years. Their best friends were in a long term, healthy, happy polyamorous relationship, and some of their friends from the second year of camp were polyamorous, too. Maybe it could work for them. They'd never followed through with it, though. It was just never the right time, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. They didn't want to risk getting sick, or add new stress to their lives, or disrupt Barclay's business, or make Ronnie feel like yet another person was disappointed in him for being an unemployed stoner. Plus, dating as a vampire had its unique difficulties. He wouldn't want to saddle just anyone with that.

By the spring of 2022, Barclay had picked up a job at a local hippie grocer and moved out to a small apartment nestled between two of the busiest streets in Centretown, where he even had a balcony. It was just a bachelor, but it was good enough for him, especially since Ronnie wasn't moving in with him— they wanted to live together eventually, but Ronnie still didn't have a job. He was on ODSP now, thankfully, but he wanted to be in a better place before anyone else relied on him.

With the newfound freedom of living on his own, Barclay wanted to float the possibility again. He invited Ronnie over

for dinner to talk about it.

When Ronnie got Barclay's text, he was grimacing at yet another flirty comment from Journee under his last post on Instagram, where he'd taken a selfie leaning out his window, a lit joint dangling from his lips. She'd said he looked so good with his shirt unbuttoned and his his hair all windswept. She'd used heart emojis, again.

He hadn't told Barclay the last few times, because he had hoped if he didn't say anything she'd feel embarrassed or at least lose interest and stop, so getting a text from him now made him jump. He was relieved that he was only inviting him over for dinner that night, but… What if he'd seen her comments and was upset with him?

He tried to push it from his mind. They'd talk about it. They talked about everything.

He got ready to go, fussing over his hair for ages— he'd given himself a haircut like Barclay's, but with a rat tail, and had to use curlers all the time or else he felt like he looked bad with his flat, straight hair.

For clothes, he first turned to the dress he'd worn to the Snow Ball, which Abigail had adjusted for him when he gained weight from his medication. He didn't want to wear something so flashy downtown on his own, though. He put on a pair of black skinny jeans, a slouchy red shirt with a knot at the waist, earrings that Barclay had made him from pieces of a broken mirror, a lightweight black long sleeve shawl, and a red baseball cap with a little embroidered flip phone on it.

He thought about attempting eyeliner, but decided against it. He'd already spent enough time messing with his hair. He grabbed his phone, wallet, and keys, said goodbye to his mom, and set out to catch the bus downtown.

Barclay was smoking a joint on the balcony when he saw Ronnie walking up the street. He quickly put it out and left it in the ashtray on the small table, buzzing Ronnie in. He was so anxious to meet him that he left his apartment to go wait by the elevator.

Possibilities were swirling through his mind. What was Ronnie going to say when he brought up seeing other people for what, the third or fourth time? Sure, they're in different places in their lives now, and it had always been a mutual decision to wait, but… He didn't want Ronnie to think he didn't love him anymore. Or that he wasn't enough on his own.

That wasn't the motivation at all. Surely Ronnie knew that… They were both still so young, and neither of them had had a lot of experience with other people before they got together. He didn't want to feel like he was missing out on what other people could offer for the whole of their relationship. He didn't want to strain them like that. Besides, if their friends could do it, why couldn't they?

He took a deep breath, shaking out his arms to try to stay in the moment. Maybe he shouldn't have smoked sativa before a stressful conversation.

Ronnie stepped off the elevator with a start. Barclay was already standing there in the hallway. He was staring into space, and jumped a bit himself when Ronnie said hello.

"Oh, uh, hey!"

Ronnie laughed, but he was concerned. "You okay?"

Barclay laughed too and apologized. "I'm fine, I'm just a little high. Uh, anyway, dinner's ready. I made lamb and vegetable skewers and rice pilaf."

"Not one of your dad's recipes again?"

"No, haha, I live too close to Greek on Wheels, so I'm learning

to make their recipes at home so I stop blowing so much on takeout," he rambled.

"Well, you're an amazing cook, so I have faith in you," Ronnie said, smiling and trailing after him as they walked up the hall. Maybe things really were okay.

Barclay opened the door and they stepped into the small bachelor apartment. Ronnie took in the decor that was new to him: all the walls and ceiling were covered in tapestries in floral, paisley, and mandala patterns; a bunk bed with a desk underneath in the middle of the longest wall; a sectional couch behind it, along the wall with the windows. The windows were decorated with dozens of stained glass birds that scattered colorful light throughout the space, and spider plants that hung in the sunlight. On the coffee table by the couch were Barclay's smoking supplies: his bong, rolling tray, jars of weed, papers, filters, bottle brush and rubbing alcohol. On the floor beside it were a handful of plush floor pillows in jewel tones. On the desk under the bed was his jewelry work station, full of beads, thread, pliers, broken ceramics, little plastic animals, and all sorts of other bits and bobs.

Barclay trotted over to his record player on the end table between the couch and his bed, turning it on and starting up the record that was already inside. Ronnie quickly recognized it as the *Svigaplatan* album by Sigur Rós; there was nothing that sounded quite like it, with the vocals in an otherworldly, invented language, purely to evoke the feeling of the music. They both loved this record.

He kicked his shoes off and turned his attention to Little Beast, Barclay's green anole, who lived in a twenty gallon tank on the other side of his bed, near the door. Little Beast was clinging to a twisted vine and basking under the heat lights.

"Come on, let's eat," Barclay said, taking his hand.

Ronnie smiled and allowed himself to be swept away into the clean, bright kitchen, where Barclay made him a plate of rice and skewers.

If Barclay seemed nervous, it's because he was. The two of them sat together on the couch and ate, listening to the record, until Ronnie broke the silence.

"So," he said awkwardly, "what's up? You haven't invited me over for a bit."

"Oh, I'm sorry it's felt that way. I, uh, I want to talk about something pretty big between us."

Ronnie's heart plummeted. "I'm sorry she's still flirting with me," he blurted.

Barclay looked at him blankly. "What? Who?"

Ronnie returned his stare. "Journee? Isn't this—"

"Ugh, is she seriously still—" he shook his head and closed his eyes. "No. I'm sorry. No, that's not what this is about." He reached over to squeeze Ronnie's thigh. "Hey, you don't need to worry about that, baby. That's her problem, not ours."

Ronnie's face flushed. "Yeah, I guess so." He met his eyes for a moment, but had to look away. "So, what is up, then?"

Barclay placed his plate down on the coffee table and folded his hands in his lap neatly. "Well, you know how we've talked about opening our relationship a few times…?"

Ronnie's mouth went dry. "Yeah?"

"I've been thinking… Now that I have my own place, and things are at least a bit better with COVID, maybe we could revisit that idea? I know you don't have your own place yet, but like, I don't know—"

"No, no, I think that could be cool," Ronnie said, then cleared his throat. "Well, not cool, or— ugh, you know what I mean.

We've wanted to give it a shot for ages now, and you're right, this is as good a time as any." He rubbed his hand against the short hair on the back of his head. "Sure, let's do it."

Barclay furrowed his eyebrows. "Are you sure? You don't sound very sure."

He almost automatically dismissed him, but he sighed and closed his eyes. "This… Are you sure this isn't about Journee?"

Barclay paused, then laughed and grabbed his hand. "No! No, honey, she's— I'm so frustrated she's still doing that! I didn't even know until you mentioned it, though, and I've been thinking about this for a few days." He rubbed his thumb across Ronnie's knuckles. "It's okay, baby, it's nothing to do with her. Forget about it."

He leaned in to press their foreheads together, then kissed him quickly. "Okay. I trust you. I think I'm ready to try."

Barclay guided his face down to kiss him again, twisting his rat tail between his fingers. "If we don't like it, we'll just stop. And that's if either of us don't like it, even a little bit."

He nodded, wrapping his arms around him. "I love you, baby."

"I love you too."

The next day, Barclay downloaded Grindr. Before he could even set up his profile, he was inundated with messages from so many men. Just so many men. He was exhausted before he got to even half of them, and what's worse, half of those guys didn't respond to him even though they'd messaged him first. Or they'd ignore his questions and send photos that he did not want to see.

He vented to Ronnie in between responding to the very few people who were not straight up rude and sexually harassing him.

Ronnie was laying in bed, trying to decide which dating app

seemed the least awful, when Barclay began to detail the horrors of the first hour of Grindr. Ronnie was entirely turned off of the app just from his stories, but Barclay was going through with meeting a guy that evening for dinner.

Maybe there was a better app for him. He remembered one of the people at group therapy talking about an app similar to Grindr, but for people in the Outside world who are from Silent Woods, or, like Ronnie, are… Monsters, kinda. It was called Monstr. It didn't show up in the search results for the first several tries, but that was normal for things like this—Shimmering Lake was still super hard to find on his new phone, which hadn't been to Silent Woods yet.

When the app finally showed up, he downloaded it and made himself a profile. He decided against using the photos Journee had commented under… Parker was a werewolf, so if she was on this app too, he would feel weird about her seeing that.

He had hardly finished making his profile when he, too, got a ton of messages. One of them had mistaken him for a trans guy, which made him feel too weird to respond to, though he didn't really know why. He sifted through all of the ones he knew he would never want to actually pursue anyway, but ended up kind of intrigued by one of the profiles.

emoboy4vamp: heyyy

m21vampire: hey

emoboy4vamp: soo ur a vampire right

He sighed.

m21vampire: yep I am

emoboy4vamp: how old r u really then?

m21vampire: i'm 21?? i don't know what you mean by that

emoboy4vampire: like when were u turned

m21vampire: oh, i wasn't turned

emoboy4vampire: wdym

m21vampire: i was born like this. my mom's a vampire, my dad's a human

emoboy4vampire: oh

emoboy4vampire: u ever turn anyone?

He rolled his eyes. Was this guy even nonhuman? He clicked on his username and glanced over his profile. Nope, he's human. Of course.

m21vampire: no, i'm not able to do that.

emoboy4vampire: wtff

emoboy2vampire: u should have that in ur profile so ppl dont waste their time talking to u

He groaned, blocked him, and tossed his phone down onto his bed. Grabbing his laptop, he spent the next few hours playing *Age of Mythology*. Eventually, his phone buzzed again. Hoping it was Barclay, he picked it up, but it was just another Monstr message.

TakeMe2Hvn: Hi Baby can You take me 2 Heaven?

m21vampire: i can't turn you, if that's what you mean.

TakeMe2Hvn: Turning not necessary … I Want to be Drained !!!

TakeMe2Hvn: I hope You can be the Big Sexy Vampire to do it ;))

He laughed out loud, then breathed, "Wow!" and blocked him too.

Unsurprisingly, he got another message immediately. He frowned when he saw the huge wall of text and pictures, but decided to read it anyway.

FearFactor: Hey stud, I'm looking for someone to fulfill a fantasy of mine.

FearFactor sent a couple pictures of a wooden stake held by a

gloved hand in dim lighting. What little of the background that was visible seemed to be showing a run down log cabin.

FearFactor: I found this old vampire hunting kit at an estate sale in Serbia. Obviously I'm not actually going to stab you through the heart… ;) But I have always been fascinated with vampire hunters, and would love to roleplay a scene with you.

FearFactor: I want to hunt you down. I have a large property a couple hours outside of Ottawa. Mostly bush. You'd chase me, I'd chase you, I'd chain you down and waterboard you with holy water, threaten you with the stake…

FearFactor: I've heard rumors that some vampires who can shapeshift are able to become demonic monsters when they're filled with adrenaline. I can easily create the perfect cocktail to turn you AND turn you on ;)

FearFactor: So, what do you think?

Fingers trembling slightly, he blocked this guy too. He deleted his account and uninstalled Monstr.

He was only occupied with his game for a little longer before it really was Barclay calling him.

"Hey, what's up? You okay?" He was worried something had gone wrong on his date.

"Oh, I'm fine now." He laughed. "I had to get out of there. I'm home now."

"What happened? Did he do anything to you?"

"No, no, he was just… Kinda creepy? He kept making weird comments like 'oh, aren't you hungry' because I was taking my time to savour my food. And he spent the entire time talking about how he gets around the WiFi blocks at work to look at porn."

Ronnie laughed in surprise. "Wow, gross, I am so glad you left. Did he pay for dinner at least?"

"Yeah, he better have. I didn't wait for the bill. I had no interest in hearing what he had to say about me not getting dessert."

"Ew, yeah."

"I can't believe he was the only good guy! I got so many messages. Most of them were obsessed with me being trans, though, and blocked me when I said I've had bottom surgery."

"That is so gross. I'm sorry baby, they should be ashamed of themselves."

"Have you had any luck?"

He snorted. "None better than yours."

Barclay exhaled slowly. "So, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That we aren't cut out for this?"

He snickered. "Yeah, maybe not."

"Wanna come over? Or maybe I could go to your place? We could watch a movie on my laptop."

"That sounds nice," Barclay said, and Ronnie could hear his smile over the phone. "I'll be there soon."

Ripley's Road Trip

It didn't matter how many times Ripley got to use his magic compass, gifted to him by Shebal so he and his dads could come and go freely through Silent Woods, it always gave him a thrill. This trip was no exception. He raised it to the window, the needle spinning in his hand as he flicked it open. It only stopped when he gave it his command: "Find the entrance to Silent Woods!"

"Which way is it pointing us, Ripley?" Brian asked.

As Ripley gave directions, his other dad, Aaron, shook his head and chuckled, remarking that he still could hardly believe that it actually worked.

Soon, as always, the road ahead began to shimmer and shift, and an off ramp appeared where a cluster of sumacs had stood. They merged lanes, passing safely and seamlessly between two other cars who were none the wiser. The sumacs remained, arching above the car.

Ripley shook his hand up and down as he rolled down the window in the back seat. Sticking nearly his whole upper body out of the window, he bathed in the reality shift that gave Silent Woods its name: the roars of the Queensway gently replaced by a breath of pure silence so thick, he couldn't even hear his own heartbeat— so fast you could miss it— before the beautiful

sound of hundreds of passenger pigeons flying overhead fully encompassed the whole world. He whooped in glee as he looked up at them, the flock so dense they were a cloud blocking out the sun.

Aaron laughed, watching his son in the side mirror. "Don't fall out!"

He ducked back inside. "That's the most passenger pigeons I've ever seen in one place! Maybe the most I've seen, ever!"

"Is that a good sign?"

"I think it is," he said, turning around to look out the rear windshield. There was no trace of the Queensway, only a winding road through the jungly sumacs, their fuzzy red bobs standing out like lit lanterns in the shady dark. "We're gonna have a great road trip!"

* * *

It didn't take them long to make their first stop. The three of them saw it at the same time: a grayish shape in the shadows of the swamp that had opened up on either side of the road. Ripley was scared it was a kelpie, but its head didn't look equine. It looked… Like a goat?

"Pull over, Dad," Ripley said. "I've got to get a closer look."

Brian diligently slowed the car to a stop, sliding up onto the shoulder of the road on the opposite side from where the creature was. "Don't get out of the car until you know what it is," he said anxiously.

"I know, Dad," he chided, but it warmed his heart how he always looked out for him, especially in wild places like this. He knew how much faith and bravery it took for both his dads to come out here with him.

He unzipped his bag and grabbed his latest book of field notes. Flipping to a new page, he leaned partway out of the window and began to sketch what he saw: a large, gray, goatlike head in the reeds, with large yellow eyes complete with square pupils, ears that stuck out to either side, and short, curved horns. He let out a soft gasp of surprise as it began to rise into the air, revealing a muscular torso that reminded him of a kangaroo, with the same lean yet powerful arms, and long, sharp claws. It began to walk forward in a bipedal gait, and as it cleared the tall reeds, he couldn't believe his eyes. It was walking on a set of bright green frog's legs!

"Roll up that window," Aaron warned, leaning forward like that would make the car go.

He slipped back inside, hastily scribbling notes as he pressed the button to make the window roll up. He'd have to make a complete drawing later. As Brian began to drive away, he turned around to look out the back window, needing to know if it had a tail or not. Luckily— maybe only Ripley thought so, though— it was bounding after them in great leaps, and he could see a long gray tail sticking out behind it.

"Hahaha! It's got a tail," he exclaimed in excitement as Brian floored it.

Thankfully, they got away from the creature quickly. It didn't pursue them very far. Ripley couldn't stop grinning as he watched it plod back into the swamp.

"What was that thing?" Brian asked, voice high pitched with stress.

"I don't know! But I think I'm going to call it a swamphopper."

* * *

The next few creatures they spotted were nothing out of the ordinary— a family of skunks crossing the road, a Canada goose flying overhead, and a fox carrying a dead quail through the undergrowth— but Ripley was certain there would be more magic soon. The compass couldn't tell him that, but he had a gut feeling, and he always trusted his instincts.

After maybe an hour or two of driving, the swampland fell away to scrappy meadows. A second road appeared on the other side of a division strip of tall cedars, pines, and maples. It looked a lot like any stretch of the Queensway in Ontario, but cars weren't the only things using this road.

As they passed a transport truck, a massive wolverine, twice the size of their car, was revealed, bounding along on the highway. It was wearing an ornate leather saddle which had a very thick seat, adorned with colorful little flags that flapped in the wind. The leather was carved beautifully with swirling patterns.

"Woah!" Aaron exclaimed.

Brian gasped too. He had to fight to focus so he wouldn't swerve off the road. "That thing won't hurt us, will it?"

"I don't think so," Ripley said, rolling his window down.

"Don't think or don't know?"

As Ripley leaned out of the window to get a better view, he saw that the leather had been layered and carved like a cruise ship, with gaps like windows peeking into small rooms that he could just barely make out. From inside these gaps, dozens of beady eyes peered down at him, frogs and chipmunks and squirrels, too.

"I think it's a bus!" he cried.

"A bus?"

"Or, well, it's acting as a bus. There's tons of little critters in

its saddle!"

Driving past its head, they saw that it held a line in its jaws, a strip of leather covered in little bells. It reached back into the saddle, laced along the edge where the windows were. Ripley saw a chipmunk's paw dart out and yank on the cord, making all the bells jingle loudly. The wolverine's tail flagged to the right and it began to lope sideways, galumphing to a stop at the shoulder of the road. Ripley craned his neck to watch as a little ladder was flung out from the window and a pair of chipmunks scampered down, disappearing away into the brush at the side of the road.

* * *

Another hour of driving in, they passed through a tunnel lined with glowing worms and mushrooms growing upside down, sending sandy drifts of glittery spores down onto the car. Brian turned on the windshield wipers, and Aaron firmly told Ripley not to open the window to collect a sample.

"Can I at least take the cover off the sunroof, then?" Ripley asked.

"Fine," Aaron said. "But don't even think about opening that, either!"

Ripley stood up in the back of the car, peering at the mushrooms and the spores through the sunroof. It was hard to get a good look at anything while they were moving, and he fell down a couple times before Brian told him to keep his butt in his seat, but he managed to get a couple okayish sketches done.

"We'll have to come back through here on our way home," he said. "I need to get a better picture of those mushrooms. And the worms! I can't even tell what they look like from here,

they're just bright green lines."

Aaron snorted. "We'll see about that."

"Aw, sweetheart, I'm sure we can at least come back for photos," Brian said. "Maybe if we find hazmat suits somewhere—"

"I'm serious," Ripley said. "They can't be poisonous. Look how many other people are driving through the tunnel." He started scanning the other cars, then pointed to one slightly ahead of them. "Look, their window's open too! It's fine!"

"What if they're, ah," Aaron began, but as they pulled up beside the car in question, both he and Ripley could see that the family in the car were all human.

"See! They're fine," Ripley said.

"Sure, okay," Aaron chuckled. "But you're not rolling down that window. I don't want any of those mushrooms growing in my car."

"I won't! But we'll be back for photos, right?"

"Yes, we'll be back for photos."

"Promise? No— double, triple, upside-down, banana split with whipped cream promise?"

Aaron and Brian both laughed lightheartedly as they repeated their special promise back to him.

Ripley pumped his fist and said, "Yes!"

* * *

On the other side of the long tunnel was an ONroute.

"Are we getting hungry?" Aaron asked.

"I am," Brian said.

"I could eat a— a unicorn," Ripley said. "But I couldn't, really. It's just an expression that I wanted to make more topical, because we're likely to see unicorns here, not just horses."

"You're very funny, Ripley," Brian smiled at him playfully in the rearview mirror, "but that does make me worry about what meat we might find in our A&W burgers here…"

Ripley laughed in shock. "I'm sure they don't use unicorn meat! At least, not like that. Any animal would be fine to eat, I'm sure, but they wouldn't sneak unicorn meat into a fast food burger. That would be— that would be disrespectful."

They pulled into the parking lot and found a spot fairly quickly. The three men hopped out of the car, Ripley skipping ahead. His dads walked calmly after him towards the large stone and glass building, with its slanting roof reaching upwards to the sky. Two flag poles stood tall near one of the entrances, but every time Ripley looked at the flags, they'd change, and not to any flag he'd ever seen before. Even if he stared at them, their colors and patterns would shimmer and flux in the wind, never resembling anything they'd shown before.

Inside, it wasn't much different from any other ONroute. There was a hallway to the bathrooms, then a row of different fast food storefronts; along the other wall, all glass, were the food court tables and chairs. Tucked in the back corner was the convenience store. There was a Subway, a Tim Horton's, an A&W, and a Pita Pit.

After they all got food, Ripley begged his dads to let them eat outside in the field behind the parking lot. They didn't need any convincing. They were always down for a picnic.

The three of them walked together through the parking lot to the large grassy patch beyond. It didn't seem to be mowed regularly, since the grass was lush and healthy with no cut tips or thinned spots, but it only grew a couple inches tall. There was lots of clover, moss, and pineapple weed creating ground cover too, with swathes of bearberry and wild thyme. It smelled

lovely, and Ripley relished in taking in deep breaths as they sat and started to eat their burgers and fries.

Ripley's attention kept being drawn to the forest which lay past a slow dip in the ground. It was full of beautiful, vibrant maples— no other trees— that grew at varying heights, almost as though the dip held a strangely lumpy hill. As he watched the wind moving through their luxurious, green branches, he noticed it wasn't just the wind that was sighing— the hill itself rose and fell slightly, taking breaths.

"Wait a minute," Ripley said, putting his burger down and standing up. "I've got to investigate this."

"What? What did you see?" Brian asked.

He brushed bits of grass and leaves off of his pants, nodding towards the hill. "Do you see how the ground is moving there? It looks like it's breathing."

Brian and Aaron both squinted at the hill, but Ripley wasn't waiting for their response. He knew what he saw.

He trekked off, moving carefully down the slope. It took him no time at all to see more odd features of the hill: two grassy protrusions about his size, if he was crouched and tucked into a ball, with barrowlike extensions leading into the dense woods. Well, he thought they were dense, but really they were just very lush and dark, with tall, thick grass and ferns growing everywhere to fill in the gaps. The hill went upward in a steeper but rounded slope above the globes, hugged on either side by the barrows. The trees started in earnest on the top of that crest, where a large ball of the grassy earth protruded forward. Long, feathery plumes of bracken stuck out from the sides of the outcrop, trembling in rhythm.

Ripley craned his neck to try to see over the protrusion, thinking he caught something glimmering in the sunlight up

there. The trees were so good at swallowing up the light, but there'd been a flash of orange, he was sure of it. What could it be?

He nearly leaped out of his skin when the outcrop of earth, and the large bulb which it came from, tilted with a creak and groan to face him. He was left, wide eyed and trembling with excitement, face to face with what suddenly came into focus: a gigantic cat made of earth and plants. The orange he'd seen were its eyes, twin orbs of citrine!

"Wow! Oh, wow!" he exclaimed, but he was too stunned to grab his phone for a photo, or his notebook and pencil to draw it.

And perhaps that was for the better— it opened its jaws, a crack in the earth revealing quartz teeth and a tongue of pink oyster mushrooms, and let out a deep, rumbling meow. The force of its breath was so strong it knocked him right over, but he was laughing with joy the whole time.

* * *

A couple more hours of driving took them through deep, dark deciduous woodland. Motes of light in all colors floated through the air, blinking in and out between the threads of sunlight that managed to pierce through the canopy. Ripley was glued to the glass with his pencil in his hand, but he never saw anything more substantial than the ghostly car shadows running alongside their car. Mesmerized, Ripley watched them morph into all sorts of different creatures: deer, dogs, cats, horses, eagles, even a human running on all fours, limbs long and distorted. They'd always changed wildly for Ripley, despite most of the reports he'd read on them— social media posts

made in jest, not knowing what they'd really seen— showing them as mostly fixed per person. Maybe he just had too big of an imagination.

It was early evening when the trees began to peter out. They passed through a nondescript small town, and even though Ripley insisted they take some turns down side streets to explore the place, they never saw anything out of the ordinary until they left the town on the other side.

It was impossible to miss: a massive stone fish, frozen in a great leap into the air, the sunlight creating glittering patterns along its body, as though it was covered in scales. On its back was a long, trailing fin, like a flag, and its head was in more of an arrow shape than a sturgeon's, but otherwise it completely resembled one. It had to be two storeys tall. It was coming out of a huge stone pool of water, and as they got closer, they could see rivulets of water running down its body into the pool.

A small shack was beside it, with a plaque out front. They pulled over and read the plaque, learning that the statue and fountain were commissioned in commemoration of the man who almost died catching the biggest fish that the surrounding three towns had ever seen, but had released the fish out of respect for its freedom and majesty. According to the plaque, it really was this big. Ripley took notes, but even he was a bit skeptical.

The shack had a bunch of t shirts, magnets, mugs, and keychains with the fish on them, so they grabbed a keychain each, leaving money in the box on the wall.

* * *

With the evening creeping on, they started looking out for a

place to get dinner. They saw many signs on the side of the highway for restaurants that they'd never heard of. Aaron and Brian were feeling less adventurous in their hunger, so they took the exit promising a KFC.

It stood alone between two corn fields. As they got out, Ripley peered into the corn, searching for the corn wolves he'd seen many years ago. He and his dads were starving, though, so they went inside pretty quick.

Inside, it was a perfectly normal KFC, but Ripley couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. He scanned the walls, the chairs and tables, the menu, even what he could see of the kitchen… Nothing seemed wrong. He frowned, rubbing his scrappy little beard in thought. Knowing Aaron would know his order, he went to a table, testing it out and feeling it all over for any weird little things, like maybe a panel or switch somewhere that did something.

When his dads came to join him with the tray of food, Brian whispered, "Did you notice that the staff all look… The same?"

Aaron chuckled. "What do you mean? They were just all white with the same haircut."

"Short brown hair, parted on the same side," Brian said, raising his hand as Aaron started to speak again, "and the exact same face shape, nose, eyes, everything."

"Well—"

"No, I'm serious, they even all had the same mole."

Aaron laughed louder this time. "What?"

"I'm serious," Brian hissed, trying not to laugh. "Look!"

Aaron— Ripley too, he'd started to pay attention when Brian said they had the same mole— casually looked over Brian's shoulders and were shocked to see that he was right. They laughed in surprise for a moment. Ripley had no answers for

them when they asked if this was something to do with Silent Woods.

"But I could do some experiments," Ripley whispered, reaching into his bag for his book. "I could go out to the car and come back in, see if they're the same. Then take a picture and send it to my group chat. Maybe they'll see something different? Maybe they don't show up the same in photos."

"No, Ripley, I don't think that's a good idea," Brian said.

"Yeah, I hate to deny you your experiments, but, uh," Aaron rubbed the back of his head, "I think the vibes are off in this one, as you kids would say."

* * *

Thankfully, they escaped that KFC unscathed, and drove maybe an hour longer before deciding to check in to the first hotel they saw. A tall building, it stood alone, with a stand of trees around it on all sides, its red brick walls proudly sporting many windows dressed in colorful shutters. The most striking feature, though, was a bright blue tube that wrapped around the building, like a dragon around a castle.

"What is going on there?" Brian asked as they got out of the car, pointing up.

"I have no idea," Aaron said, hauling their bags out of the trunk.

"It looks like a slide, doesn't it?" Ripley commented. "I'm so excited to see the inside of this place!"

They opened the bright yellow door, painted with big blobs of color, and piled into the small lobby. It was a fairly normal hotel lobby, with a set of elevators on one wall. A big landscape painting took up most of the other wall. Ripley looked up,

marveling at the open space reaching all the way to the top floor. Colorful balls made of thick thread, reminding him of rubber band balls, hung from the high ceiling at various intervals.

There was a desk that took up the entire wall opposite the front doors, with two doors in either corner. The desk had a high sort of lip that covered anything happening behind it. They could just see the head and shoulders of the worker sitting on the other side, who wore a bright yellow cravat, a red and blue bellhop hat, and a matching bellhop uniform with exaggerated shoulder pads.

Ripley handled arranging their rooms. They each got a keycard and took the elevators to the third floor. The elevators were normal, to Ripley's disappointment.

He ran out of the elevator and looked all around the hallway. The wallpaper, doors, and carpet were colorful, and there was a balcony overlooking the lobby that ran along every wall, but everything looked completely normal. Their rooms were normal too. He needed to find out what that tube was!

He decided he was going to explore the hotel. He went to every floor, but they were all the same as the third: a hallway that went in a loop with a long green and yellow carpet, blue and pink wallpaper, and doors painted every color of the rainbow. He pressed against the walls at random intervals to see if there were maybe secret doors or pressure panels that would unlock a hidden room, but nothing happened.

He had high hopes for the top floor, though— he had counted one fewer balcony than the numbers on the elevator panel. And he was right! As soon as the elevator doors opened, he was faced with a huge room, the size of the whole hotel lobby, filled with a rainbow of ball pit balls. There was a whole climbing structure suspended over the floor, with a rope ladder leading

up into it.

He leaped into the balls, squealing with glee. After swimming through them for a few minutes, he made his way to the rope ladder and climbed up to the foam floor above. There was a row of big foam cylinders that he ran through, shoulder checking each of them, til he tumbled out into a round room where the floor slowly spun. There was a foam arm moving in the opposite direction to the floor. Laughing, he jumped over it a few times before it caught his foot and he faceplanted.

He hauled himself up onto all fours and crawled to the doorway on the other side of the room, clambering onto the unmoving ledge. Panting, he took a moment to rest. He looked over his shoulder and saw the gaping blue mouth of a slide.

He gasped. That must be the tube! Throwing himself down it without a second thought, he whirled down the long slide, spinning all the way around the building. It went on quite a while with no light at the end, and he was starting to get worried, until a crack appeared like a set of doors opening. He didn't have any time to think of what that could be or where he was getting spat out before he was launched into the lobby, having burst through two halves of the landscape mural, opened like double doors to let him out.

"I see you found the slide," the man behind the desk said with a grin. "How was it?"

"So awesome!" Ripley exclaimed, scrambling to his feet and dusting himself off before dashing to the elevator. "I can't wait to hear what my dads think of that."

The elevator doors opened and Aaron was standing there, surprised to see him. They filled each other in on their current adventure; Ripley's foray in the playroom and Aaron's quest to fetch the UberEats Dairy Queen that should be arriving

momentarily.

"Who would've thought that a hotel would have a secret playroom and slide," he said with a chuckle.

"Well, to be fair, it kinda looked like one, didn't it?"

"You're right, but why would they even have it?"

"Why would there be a fish the size of a two storey building, or a KFC staffed by clones, or a forest that's a cat, or a wolverine bus, or a— a whatever a swamphopper is?" He pulled out the magic compass from his pocket. "Or this thing?"

His dad laughed heartily and patted his shoulder. "You've got a point, buddy."

Ripley grinned. "Thank you so much for going on this trip with me, Dad. This is shaping up to be our best road trip yet!"

Dead End Gas Station

Halfway through October, Ava was still working at the gas station. She'd finished school in the early summer and had immediately gotten the job. She hated few things less, but there weren't many other options.

At least she had a car now. Alan and Aileen had gotten a newer one, so she got the old car, since Henry was happy with his bike and Gwen was too scared to learn how to drive. Maybe one day she'd get out of here and make something of herself.

Until then, though, she was serving shitty premade sandwiches to juiced up country boys and mopping the floor of the tiny store way past midnight, every weekday night.

Today was Friday the 13th… And during the spookiest month of the year, at that. Ava tried not to be superstitious, but something about working late at the gas station all alone, with hardly any foot traffic, made the wind howling outside sound scary like it used to when she was little. Maybe that's why she jumped when the man stumbled in, unable to put one foot in front of the other. But it was probably because he was acting just like her dad did when he was drunk. Not Alan. Her… Biological dad, the man she'd tried so hard to forget, from the past she'd tried so hard to put behind her.

"Hey," he shouted, lumbering over. He crashed into a shelf

of chips on his way, knocking several bags to the ground. He kicked them and swore incoherently as he walked. "Hey."

Ava watched him carefully, glad for the plexiglass screen that remained from the early days of the pandemic. "How can I help you, sir?" she defaulted to her cheerful customer service voice in hopes that her wariness wouldn't show through.

"How do you get to Saint Ola?" he yelled, slurring. He got up really close to the glass and repeated himself, spitting all over.

Ava was starting to freeze up. She stared at him for a moment too long and he got angry.

"Can you hear me? Can you even hear me through this thing?" He popped his fist against the plexiglass.

She flinched hard, but it snapped her out of the building trance. "Yes, sir," she said, reaching for the box of maps kept behind the counter. She rifled through them and pulled out one for their area. Pressing it to the glass, she tried to point out the route he'd need to take. Her voice and hands trembled, watching his red, sweaty face become creased and his eyes take on a hard glint.

"Quit mumbling," he growled.

No, fuck this, she decided. "I— I don't think you're good to drive tonight," she said, letting the map fall onto the counter. "There's a motel up the road. You should check in there. O-or you can sleep in your truck in the parking lot."

"Fuck you," he slurred. "You don't know what's good for me. Dumb bitch. I asked you a question, and you'll answer it."

Ava stopped talking altogether. She stared at him with eyes like saucers, feeling his eyes roam across her body. He slid a hand under the plexiglass, trying to grab the map from her, and she shot it to the floor behind her.

"What's wrong with you? What's fucking wrong with you?

Stupid dyke!" He slammed his fist against the glass, much harder this time.

A squeak of a gasp leaped from her mouth, but all she could do was stare. She was frozen again. She wanted Genette, but her heart squeezed painfully when she remembered that's not an option anymore. They've been on a break since August. She wanted Henry, but he wasn't at work right now, so who knows if he'd get here in time. She just wanted someone to come stop all of this.

The man pounded on the glass a couple more times, slinging slurs at her. He demanded she give him gas, but eventually gave up when she didn't react at all, just staring straight ahead. He knocked over the display of discount chocolate bars on the counter on his way out, but at least he was gone.

As soon as the door shut, she covered her face and cried soundlessly. She itched for a cigarette, but she'd made it a whole month now, she didn't want to relapse.

The mess of the store was very still and quiet now. Her brain was loud to make up for the silence, playing her horrible life over and over in her mind. Her traumatic childhood, losing her parents, clinging to her siblings who only mimicked what her parents did to them all. Not knowing how to love her new family. Having that bond be tested by Cole, by Henry. Henry's… Issues at camp. All the things she still kept buried… All the things that led to her explosive breakup with Genette, the only girl she'd ever let herself have feelings for. The girl she still loved so much. It tore her apart all over again.

She still didn't really understand why they broke up. Well, no, she understood why Genette left her… She didn't understand her own actions. Why was she so defensive when it came to Henry, acting like nothing had ever happened between them?

Why was she so angry with Genette for still hating him? She was there when he attacked her. She'd heard all the horror stories from their childhood. Why did it hurt her so bad to see this girl, who adored her and cared for her, reacting in a totally reasonable way to her brother's still kind of sketchy behavior? Yes, he's made so much progress, but… But Genette's right. She isn't the one who's seeing it day to day. She only gets the worst of it, when Ava vents to her. Of course she's gonna think he's still that bad.

But what was she supposed to do? Let her girlfriend stare daggers at one of the few people in the whole world who'd go to bat for her?

Henry's still here, after all. Genette isn't. Not anymore.

Maybe Ava shouldn't be here anymore, either.

She thought about leaving. She thought about getting into her car and driving away… Living in the back of her car, drifting from town to town. Picking up odd jobs to survive. It wouldn't be easy, but would it really be worse than this?

She didn't know. She wasn't sure if she could handle it. But the thought of staying here, at this dead end gas station… It made her want to do something worse than disappear.

She grabbed her stuff from the tiny staff room and walked out, stepping over the mess that man had made. She made a beeline for her car— not without scoping the parking lot to make sure he wasn't hanging around— and got in. The sound of her closing the door was the loudest thing over the noise of a country night. Not giving herself any more time to second guess herself, she started the car and drove.

Don't Forget To Call

The early April air was refreshing after being stuck in her car for hours. Ava walked around the grassy pit stop near Sudbury, stretching her legs and working out the cracks in her elbows and back. There were a few big camper RVs there too, and a family was eating lunch at a picnic table nearby. Big, tall trees towered over the campsite, though their leaves were hardly more than buds and couldn't keep out the sunshine.

Ava had been on the road since the night she walked out of work. She had driven home to pack and leave a goodbye note, then she was gone. She'd grown to regret not saying goodbye properly, but it was what she needed at the time. If she'd had that tearful hugfest with Gwen and Aileen, and even Cole, she wouldn't have left. And she really, really needed to leave.

It had been hard going at first, but it was the most rewarding struggle of her life. She hadn't been able to put her one and only job on her resume, so she had to start from the ground up. She washed dishes in diners, flipped burgers in ONroute A&W's, painted fences and mowed lawns, raked leaves and watched pets, picked rocks and cleaned houses. She never stayed in one place too long: Napanee, Belleville, Tamworth, Stirling, Marmora, even all the way up to Bancroft.

She'd stayed at plenty of campsites, too, like she one she was at

now, sleeping in her car. The winter had been rough, but she'd managed, and summer was just around the corner now. Money was tight, but not smoking and drinking anymore made things easier. Basically her only unnecessary expense was bleach to keep her hair in the style she liked: cut just past her chin, blonde halfway down. She was excited to start fishing and foraging so she could cut food costs, and bathing and doing laundry in rivers, and sleeping outside under the stars…

She never thought that this was where she'd end up, but she'd never been happier.

She was sitting on the hood of her car, eating a gas station BLT, when her phone began to ring. She tucked her sandwich into its plastic container and put it down on the hood, snatching up her phone.

It was Genette.

She took a breath, let it out, and answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Hi."

"Where are you right now?"

She looked around at the campground. "I'm on my way to Kingston."

"Oh, are you driving?"

"No, no, I'm pulled over." She didn't want to give Genette her exact location. She didn't know why… It hadn't been Genette who was obsessive and overbearing in their relationship.

"Okay, good. What are you doing in Kingston?"

"I'm going to try to busk," Ava said. She didn't know if that was true. "Probably start as a dishwasher somewhere, though."

"That'll be fun," she said, though it felt like a stock response.

"So, why'd you call?"

"Wh— I wanted to check on you," she said, sounding surprised

and almost offended. "I haven't heard from you since February."

Ava twisted her lips into a small frown. She didn't really know what to say. "I've been busy…"

Genette was quiet for a moment, then said, "I get it." She cleared her throat, then, "I guess that means you've been too busy to see anyone else?"

Ava pulled a face. Why was this what she was asking? "What… What do you mean by that?"

She tried to backtrack, saying she was talking about people from camp, but Ava knew what she meant.

"Yeah, I've been too busy to get a new girlfriend." Maybe that was a little mean. "What about you? Are you dating anyone now?"

Her silence spelled guilt, but she said, "No."

Ava didn't know how to feel about that. She didn't know why they were even talking about this.

"I mean," she said, taking in a breath, "I have been talking to the other campers. Did you hear— well, I suppose you didn't— they're gonna have another round of camp this summer."

Ava was glad for the change of topic. "Oh, are they? I was wondering when they were gonna start that up again."

"Yeah, it was starting to look like COVID took them out," she said, "even though that isn't really an issue for them."

"I figured Shebal was taking time to be a father."

"That's true." Genette gave a meek little laugh. "I hope that's taught him and Jason how to be more competent counselors for the new kids."

Ava laughed. "Yeah, me too. God, what a gongshow."

"It was fun, though," Genette said, adding hastily, "at times."

Ava murmured, "And it wasn't all their fault. There was a lot going on."

"Yeah. There was."

The heavy, flighty feeling returned. She wanted to hang up, but knew that would only make things worse.

Then Genette said something that caught her off guard: "I'm sorry."

Ava didn't know how to respond, so she just didn't.

"I know how much it hurts you that I held… Hold such a grudge against Henry. It took me a long time to make sense of why you even cared about him anymore. It was hard to watch you act like nothing happened after I saw him attack you—"

"You weren't there my whole life," Ava cut her off. She was tired of talking in circles every time this came up. "He did terrible things to me as a kid… Worse than what happened at camp. Worse than some of the stuff I've told you about. I… I get it. Why you hate him. I used to hate him too… You know that. I—" her voice broke and she had to cover her mouth for a moment, trying to steady her breathing. The world felt huge around her, and she felt every mile of distance. "I feel better than I have in my entire life now that I know for sure he won't—"

"You don't have to say it," Genette whispered.

She sucked back a sob, wiping her tears and turning away so that poor family wouldn't have to see her. "I wanted a big brother. I still w-want my big brother. You were right to be protective of me. He's… He's a lot better now, but it's still there." She swallowed and sniffled. "I think it just took me some time to understand that you weren't trying to control me… That I was, um, kinda projecting—"

"Hey, we don't have to get into that," Genette said softly, her voice like a warm, comforting hand running down her back. "It's in the past. No need to open old wounds."

Ava sighed weakly. "Th-thank you. For everything. A-and

I'm sorry."

Genette started to say something, but Ava's phone was ringing, so she didn't hear her. They awkwardly said a rushed goodbye as Ava took the other call.

"Ava, how are you doing?" Aileen's calming, concerned voice crackled through.

She had to very quickly pretend she wasn't crying, a skill that she had had a lot of time to develop. "I'm good, Mom."

"Are you sure? You don't sound good."

"I'm sure."

"Okay, I won't pry, but you can talk to me about anything, you know? Oh— if you're not safe—"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. I'm just— Genette called."

"Oh… And how did that go?"

She paused for a long time. Eventually, she said, "Maybe I'll tell you another time."

"Okay, I'll be here when you're ready."

"So, um, why are you calling? Is everything okay at home?"

"Oh, yes, we're all alright. I just miss you. I wanted to call and catch up. Henry is shadowing Alan at work now, Gwen is, well, about the same as she was last time we spoke. Cole is having some trouble with food these days… He asks about you a lot."

"I should call more… I'm sorry."

"No, no, don't apologize. You're focusing on yourself right now… Discovering yourself. This is the age for it!"

Ava laughed, but her heart wasn't in it. She stared at her unfinished sandwich, then the mulchy ground, then the family eating together. Her heart ached. "Mom," she mumbled, without even really realizing it, "I think I wanna come home."

Aileen was surprised. "Oh. Oh! Okay. Do you think you'll head back now, or—"

"Maybe around the end of the summer," she said. The thought of being in that house again still made anxiety bubble up in her insides, so she blurted, "But… Do you think you could help me apply at Algonquin? In Ottawa? Or— or anywhere, honestly."

Aileen stifled a laugh, but Ava could tell it wasn't mockery. "Yes, of course, sweetheart. Let's have a proper conversation sometime soon and we'll go over your goals. We'll figure something out for you, don't you worry."

She almost started crying again, but she held it together. At least until she could hang up and weep in her car alone. "Thanks, Mom."

"You're very welcome, Ava."

They said a goodbye that was even more painful than the one she shared with Genette… But at least this slice of her future seemed bright. And maybe she was just too busy looking at the dark clouds to see the silver lining.

Below The Surface

It had been a few years since I was last at Shimmering Lake. I hadn't thought about it for a while, honestly; I'd graduated last year and had been up in Nunavut, near Coral Harbour, with my cousins and their parents. Their sled tour company and small motel were growing, bouncing back nicely after being hit hard by the pandemic, with a second location being spoken about closer to Iqaluit. I was in charge of breeding their dogs and helping raise the puppies so they'd be strong, fast, receptive, and gentle, and I loved every part of it.

Back home, Hafsa had been accepted into a journalism program at Carleton University in Ottawa, so she had been busy there, even taking summer courses and working in the city to pay her tuition. Gwen's family sent her some money at the start, but she insisted on doing it all by herself. I was very proud of her and told her so every time we talked, which wasn't much lately. Every word counted between us, all three of us. Most times we talked, it was on a video call all together, so we could at least try to feel like we were in the same room.

I was sitting on the couch in the puppy room, watching the current litter playing while their mother slept, when someone knocked at the door.

"Package for you, Sid," Paula, my aunt, said. "And dinner will

be ready soon."

"Thank you!" I called, getting up from the creaky old couch and crossing the room, careful not to step on any of the energetic puppies who zoomed around my feet. I opened the door to see Paula walking back down the hall to the living room and kitchen, past the four bedrooms and bathroom. I could see my cousins working on a big puzzle on the coffee table. I could hear Taamusi walking Serena through how to cook caribou, even though Taamusi had finished cooking already.

"You know you don't have to tell me all this," Serena was saying. "If you'd eat my cooking, you'll see."

"You grew up in Vancouver, what do you know?" Taamusi poked fun at her.

"Grew up! I was there for six years. And we hunted in Manitoba, you know that, your father and mine are still best friends."

"Yes, and I know you weren't hunting caribou."

Serena gasped dramatically.

"Sere!" Paula laughed. "Let my husband do what he does best."

I smiled. I loved my family here, even though I missed Genette, Grandma Fran, and Uncle John very much. Wondering if the package was from them, I picked it up from the floor and went back into my puppy room.

The name on the package was Gwen's, actually. I smiled bigger, but felt a twinge of anxiety. It must be another one of her sweet care packages. She liked sending me fun teas, recipes to try, socks she knit, and comics she got from Laurie, who worked at a comic book store in downtown Ottawa. But… I could admit that I wasn't looking forward to her letter. She was always a little… I don't know, passive aggressively needy,

is probably what Genette would say. I know it was hard for her that both Hafsa and I were so busy now, while she was still at home, but it was like she thought we were somehow doing this on purpose, like we wanted to leave her behind.

I placed the package on the small table beside the couch. It was my makeshift nightstand, where I left hand sanitizer, Lysol wipes, lotion, and my wallet. I slept in this room too. At night, the dogs mostly slept in the enclosed kennel right outside. The way in was either through my room or through the long run outside, but more often than not, people went through here. When the puppies were quite young, and when the mother dogs were getting close to their due date, they'd sleep in here with me. I had stayed up through the night for two different whelpings. It was hard work, but there was no better reward than getting to watch Taamusi, Andy, and Mary train the pups I spent so much energy rearing.

We all ate together around the TV. Ben, who was sixteen and had been in a scene phase since he was little, made kandi bracelets for his sister, our cousin, and me. Daisy-Anne, who was my age, talked through the DVD she'd picked out for us to watch, while Mary, who was one year older than us, kept telling her to be quiet.

Dinner was delicious as always: caribou stew with mushrooms, onions, and potatoes, made from the shoulder Taamusi had been given by a neighbor.

Andy finished eating first and started cleaning up.

"What, Ataata, don't you like the movie?" Daisy-Anne called.

"I do, I'm watching."

"You're doing the dishes!"

Mary hushed her again with an exasperated side eye in my direction.

That was life in the downtime here. When I had to work, I would go out with the adults on shopping trips, or watch the house and teach Ben how to take appointments while they went on overnight tours, or do desensitization training with the puppies. I didn't help much with the sled training or the tours, but I got to see tons of community members when they came to visit or when we visited them. It was a bit overwhelming at times; back in Ontario, we didn't get a lot of visits from our neighbors, so I guess I was kind of isolated. Even though it took me a while to overcome my shyness, it was amazing to feel like I was actually a part of the community up here, how my mom once was.

Even though I loved it up here, living where the winters weren't so bad comparatively had made my tolerance for this climate not so great. I wondered how many more years it would take to get used to it, and if I'd really be up here that long. It weighed on my heart to be away from my partners and the rest of my family, too.

But it was nice, really nice, for a long time.

Then I started getting the dreams.

At first I wasn't sure what was going on. If I was trying to escape or being chased for fun, it was hard to tell. But there was always an underlying sense of fear, or distrust, or unhappiness. It was a couple of weeks before I saw who was chasing me. Brilliant, beautiful white coat, brilliant, beautiful blue eyes. A mouth full of sharp teeth.

I woke with a gasp, sweat drenching my body. I peeled the blankets off and sat up on the couch. Across the room, Patch, the pregnant dog staying with me, stirred. She whined and snuffled. With a tense sigh, I tried to push the dream away by hunkering down beside her and petting her. She was a sweet

and goofy girl, but she had been tired lately. I sat beside her nesting box and played with her ears until she gently bit my arm to tell me she'd had enough. When I woke up, I was on the floor beside her and she was licking my face, asking to be let out.

That day, Paula put me to work. We went out for groceries and other general supplies, and to pick up a couple big packages from the post office. Then I helped with dinner, and Taamusi teased me tenfold about how I'd spent my life cooking in white kitchens— even Uncle John hadn't taught me anything Taamusi saw as worthwhile.

By bedtime, I'd almost forgotten about my dream.

Almost.

It got worse over the next two weeks. I saw him every time I closed my eyes. I felt his strength, the way he moved under me as he pulled me through the water, the way his mane plastered to my skin when he brought me up to breathe. Even when Patch had her puppies, I wasn't putting in the effort that I always had. I got Daisy-Anne to help me out because I was just too tired.

I tried to chalk it up to exhaustion and lost sleep when I first saw him during the daytime. It was barely a glimpse, but there was no mistaking the figure. Nothing else up here could look like that.

Of course, it wasn't really him. And that was maybe what scared me most. It scared me so bad that I doubled, then tripled, my work with the dogs. I took them out for hours every day when they weren't working. I played with them on the run, I ate with them too. I didn't have time for anyone but the dogs. I even started sleeping in their kennel, just my body on the floor with the warm dogs all around. If I distanced myself from the dreams, really surrounded myself with the reality of where I

was, maybe they'd stop.

That's what I kept telling myself.

The long months with little sun rolled on and I stayed in the kennel as often as I could handle. The breathing of the dogs around me was something good to focus on while the cold kept me from falling asleep. That was my new plan. Coupled with how overworked I was, it was honestly hard to think of him anymore.

In the weeks before the New Year, as my family buzzed with excitement over holiday preparations, I struggled to stay present. All the self inflicted insomnia and burnout was catching up to me. I was falling asleep at the breakfast table one morning when Paula brought me a letter.

"Oh, thanks," I mumbled, blinking myself awake and opening it with shaky hands.

She tutted. "Try not to use my pancakes as a pillow, okay Sid?"

My cousins laughed and I tried to keep a smile on my face as I pulled out a card. The photo on the card was of a beautiful Christmas tree, in front of big glass doors looking out over a snowy lakefront. I knew exactly where this was taken. Opening it with a true smile and anticipating Gwen's silly doodles, I barely caught the piece of paper before it fell right onto my pancakes.

"Is that a plane ticket?" Ben asked.

I blinked several times. "Yeah. I guess it is."

"Where are you going? Aren't you spending the holidays with us?"

I read the message in the card. Gwen and her family had invited me, Hafsa and her family, and even Nebula, who hadn't even been dating Gwen for nearly two years, to spend

Christmas with them. And Gwen, being Gwen, had already bought me a ticket.

I knew there was no way out of this, at least not one that would end pretty. I'd looked forward to spending the holidays here for so long… I guess I'd have to try again next year. There was no way I'd convince Gwen that I wasn't abandoning her if I didn't go.

Andy got up with the empty plates and came to look over my shoulder at the card. He hummed thoughtfully and patted my shoulder. "It looks like Sid's partner wants him home for Christmas."

I looked up at him, panicked. "I can tell her to get a refund, or—"

"Hey now, it's okay. I think you need this break anyway. We'll be fine here without you, don't you worry."

Ben clung to my arm. "But I'll miss you!"

"I'll bring you back something cool, I promise."

His eyes lit up. "Gwen knits, right? I'll trade her a kandi bracelet for something."

I smiled. "She'll love that."

As Ben went on to work furiously at the best kandi bracelet he's ever made, I went to my room to pack. By the afternoon, I somewhat came out of my sleeplessness trance and realized, while loading the car with my bags, that I was going to get on a plane and go first thing tomorrow morning. After being here for so many months, and after being trapped in my nightmares for so much of it, that didn't seem possible.

But maybe Andy was right. This break might fix me. Being away from the place where the dreams began, and being closer to where the object of them was, might make all of this go away.

Oh, how hopeful I was.

I slept the whole flight back to Ottawa and had to be woken up by the person next to me when we had landed. Groggily getting my things and disembarking, I picked up the rest of my luggage and then nearly fell asleep again waiting for Gwen's parents to come get me.

I sat in the passenger seat as Alan drove me to his house. Cole was in the back playing with his new great white shark toy that he'd gotten for his sixth birthday. He was obsessed with them.

The first thing he said to me was, "Did you see any sharks when you were in the arctic?"

"No."

"That's right, I was pop quizzing you. There are no sharks there."

"That's not true, actually," I said, turning around to face him. "I just wasn't going to the ocean. There's tons of sharks in the arctic."

"What? What? But sharks don't like the snow and ice!"

"Yours don't, yeah. I know you know everything about great whites. But there are other kinds of sharks."

"Is that true, Dad?"

"Yep."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask."

"You have to get me a book about the other kinds of sharks."

He laughed lightly. "I will, Cole."

Under his breath, he said, "I'll have my next birthday soon so I don't have to wait."

I slowly felt better and more awake as we drove, resting my head on the window. Snow was coming down lightly, and there was a ton already on the ground, which slowed down the drive to about four hours. We listened to the radio until Alan got

tired of the Christmas themed ads and songs that were on every station. He got me to put in a CD— Cole begged for *River of Dreams* by Billy Joel.

As we got closer, glimpses of the silvery frozen lake between the snowy trees kept making my heart jump.

It was dinnertime by the time we arrived. The dark sky hugged the red, green, and white light cast off by the string lights flung over the whole house. As we crawled down the driveway, I squinted to see through the large kitchen window. A brightly lit Christmas tree was just visible beyond the dining table, where I could almost see Gwen's family sitting. In the yard, reindeer made of bright yellow lights pulled a big plastic sleigh with red LED strip lights on the runners and top rail. I had never understood Christmas decorations that had Santa or his sleigh in them. Wasn't he supposed to be flying around delivering presents, not stuck on someone's lawn?

Cole complained about being hungry as we pulled into the garage. As soon as Alan turned the car off and undid the child lock, he scampered out and into the house.

Alan opened his door and stepped out. "Come on in for food first, okay Sid? We'll get your stuff inside later."

I nodded. "Thanks, Alan."

The warm air pulled me in like a hug as he opened the door to the house. The entrance from the garage was off to the side of the kitchen, opposite the front door and beside the bathroom Alan had added in the first year of the pandemic.

I took off my boots and coat as Gwen jumped up from the table and ran across the room to see me. We hugged instantly and I buried my head in her shoulder, breathing in her comforting smell. It had been too long since I was here.

After a long, savouring moment, she held me by my shoulders,

smiling at me brightly. "I've missed you so much!"

"I've missed you too," I said, not really knowing what to do with myself.

She was beautiful, as always. She had her hair in two long braids with red bows at the ends, matching her bright red leggings. She wore a red and green flannel shirt, which I'm pretty sure she stole from me a couple years ago, and a scarf she had knitted to look like a string of Christmas lights. I felt silly in sweatpants and a baggy old shirt that I'd gotten from Paula, after one of the dogs threw up on mine. My shoulder length, choppy hair was a mess, and I definitely had duffel bags under my eyes.

Aileen welcomed me in with Cole glued to her hip. "It's good to see you again, Sid."

I smiled at her, exhausted and distracted, shuffling over to sit beside my partner and her sister as Cole helped Aileen serve dinner: fish fingers for him, beets and pork chops for everyone else.

"We've gotta get rid of all this pork before Hafsa and her parents come," Aileen said apologetically as she gave me a plate. "It'll go bad if we wait til they've gone home again."

"I'm not opposed to pork."

Ava picked at hers meekly. She wasn't dressed any better than me and looked worse, somehow. Her hair was in the style she'd come to prefer since camp: grown to her chin, the bottom half bleached blonde, with a bit of an undercut. It was limp and greasy, though, and she wore a stretched out tank top under a hunting camo zipper hoodie and a pair of ripped sweatpants.

"Are you holding up okay tonight?" Aileen asked her when she noticed she wasn't eating much.

"Yeah, just tired," she said with a flat smile.

I gave Gwen a worried look and snuck a text under the table.

Gwen: she got kicked out of uni like immediately

Sid: What???

Gwen: her roommate planted ketamine on her

Gwen: she got kicked out of her dorm and everything

Sid: Holy shit

And I thought my problems were bad.

Alan complimented Aileen's cooking and asked if Henry was home yet.

She shook her head. "He's squeezing in as much time as possible at work before the holidays."

Ava laughed dryly, mumbling something nobody caught and nobody asked her to repeat.

The days stretched on lazily as we waited for Christmas, and the rest of our friends, to arrive. We played board games, watched old Christmas movies, and had snowball fights and snow fort competitions with Cole. Some nights we baked Christmas cookies, or packed our dinner into thermal bags and went out on the lake for some ice fishing.

I was sleeping in Gwen's bed because Hafsa's parents would be sleeping in the guest room— another new addition— and Nebula would be sleeping on the couch. If they ever responded to Gwen's invite, that is.

I wasn't surprised that they hadn't yet. I could tell she was really hurt over it. She and Nebula had been together for just over two years, and while they hadn't spoken much since the breakup, they had meant a lot to her when they were together. It was hard for me to see her like this. Even though their relationship had ended pretty badly and caused a lot of problems between the three of us, I never wanted to see Gwen in pain.

I tried to help her, to be present for her. I really did. But the dreams came back.

The night before Christmas Eve, I woke up in a cold sweat and had to run to the bathroom to throw up. I swore on my life it was lakewater that came spilling out of my mouth.

Sitting on the cold bathroom floor, shaking beside the toilet, I willed myself not to cry. I didn't want to wake anyone up. I didn't want to worry Gwen… I really should be getting back to bed, but my legs were too weak. Stiffness crept up through my limbs and into my chest. My head spun. I nearly threw up again, but my stomach was empty.

There was a soft knock on the door and I yelped.

"You okay in there?" Ava's voice drifted in.

I croaked, "Y-yeah…"

"Sid?"

"Yeah." I coughed. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"Don't worry about it… Hey, are you like, decent?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Can I come in?"

"Yeah, sorry," I tried to stand as she opened the door a crack and slipped in. "I'll—"

"No, it's fine, sit down. I don't need to pee or anything." She turned the tap and splashed her face with some cold water. She stared at the sink for several moments, then lowered herself to the floor. Sighing, she wiped the bleached ends of her bob from her forehead. "Nightmares, huh?"

I laughed a small, hollow laugh. "Like you wouldn't believe."

She nodded, looking down at the tile floor between her knees.

The silence between us wasn't heavy, not at all. It was comforting. I fell in sync with her breathing, and it didn't take long for my panic to subside and my stomach to settle. She

didn't need to say anything to make me feel better, but from the look on her face, I thought she might need more from me.

"So, um, I heard about what happened," I started, but stopped when she raised her hand.

"Do not even worry about it, Sid. It's… I can't do anything about it so there's no point in thinking about it."

"But you are thinking about it. And it's hurting you."

She didn't respond.

"You're allowed to feel whatever it is that you're feeling because of what happened. You owe yourself that much."

She let out another ragged sigh and pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes. "I just don't know why anyone would think of me like that. After everything with my parents, I just… I don't get it. And it— it pisses me off that that's what really hurts me. The blow to my reputation, my character. Not that I got kicked out of school, even though I gave up my… My little runaway road trip or whatever for a chance at a normal adolescence, and now that's for nothing."

I didn't have anything smart to say, so I just patted her shoulder as comfortingly as I could.

"It's not fair. I deserve to still be there, not her. She should be sitting in the bathroom at three in the morning feeling like shit."

I nodded. "Maybe she is."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. If she's a shitty enough person to do that to you, it's gotta catch up to her at some point."

She chuckled unhappily. "I guess you're right." She folded her arms over her knees and rested her chin on them. "I'm just so glad I have Genette in my life. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

I opened my mouth, but cut myself off before I could say something dumb. They'd broken up ages ago, and weren't really on great terms— which is why Genette and the rest of my family weren't invited to spend Christmas here. But whatever Ava meant, it wasn't my business. Instead, I said, "You think you can get some sleep?"

"Doubt it. Can you?"

The thought of going back into Gwen's room made me feel sick. She'd be there, yeah, but I'd be alone. "I don't think so."

She offered me her hand and pulled us both up. "Let's get coffee."

We both crashed hard that afternoon, so she made us more coffee and laughed about it, and things felt okay. Even so, I had to avoid the windows. The grip of the lake was far too strong on me.

Hafsa and her family arrived the next day. It was only her and her human father, Mr. Chowdhury, because Mrs. Chowdhury had a cold and didn't want to pass it on to anyone; they assured us that it wasn't COVID.

I welcomed them into the house and helped them carry their things inside. Mr. Chowdhury insisted on doing the majority of it himself, but found it hard to roll himself in his wheelchair back and forth across the entire house, so he settled for telling me what to do the whole time.

Hafsa was completely exhausted when she'd finished setting herself up in Gwen's room and helping Mr. Chowdhury set himself up in the guest room. She collapsed on the couch and was immediately asked by Cole if she could turn into a lion or if that was a joke.

She bared her teeth and growled.

Cole hollered and ran to his room giggling.

I sat down beside her and she flopped against me. "You okay, baby?"

"Do you know how far of a drive that was? And in all that snow?" She looked up at me, eyes huge. "Feet of snow, Sid. Blizzard conditions."

"Hey, at least you can get your license," Gwen teased.

"It is not worth it!"

Gwen cuddled up to her. "Come on, cheer up. You're here, and you've proven that you can come visit me no matter the weather."

We hung out on the couch together and watched a movie until it was time for dinner. Alan made hot dogs and fries with a really good salad. Cole, again, had fish fingers, but he didn't come when Alan called him.

Worried, Aileen stood up from the table. "I'll go check on him."

Gwen reached out to her but didn't touch her. "No, you sit, I'll go."

As she left, Aileen rubbed her temples and sighed.

Mr. Chowdhury twisted back and forth in his wheelchair to get comfortable. "Is everything alright?"

"The doctor thinks he's got ARFID, but I don't know," she said, tired and stressed. "He gets so fixated on certain foods and refuses to eat anything else. He's at least been eating fish fingers now too instead of just chicken nuggets, but he never gets vegetables or fruits or literally anything else. It's so hard on him." She shook her head with another sigh. "He used to eat so well when he was a toddler. I don't know what happened."

He nodded thoughtfully.

Gwen came back with a very tired Cole trailing after her; he at least perked up when he saw his plate and sat himself down,

putting his shark plushie on the table beside him.

Mr. Chowdhury leaned over the table to talk to him. "Are you two sharing dinner?"

He nodded.

"Ah, I see. You've chosen the perfect thing to eat with your friend."

He smiled and nodded again.

"But if I were to dine with my friend from the ocean, do you know what I'd serve?"

"What?"

"I'd make a soup."

He looked confused.

"Well, living in all that water, they must get mouthfuls of it along with each bite of their fishy dinner. I bet coming up on land would make them think eating fish sticks is a little too dry. So the best we could do for our shark friend is to fix up a bowl of soup, right?"

He looked at Aileen. "Is there fish soup?"

She smiled gratefully. "There sure is, Cole."

On Christmas morning, everyone gathered around the tree, some piling onto the big sectional couch, some on the floor. Cole was too wrapped up in the excitement of opening presents to seem too tired. He got to open his presents first.

"A book about sharks!" he shouted, holding it up from the shredded wrapping paper. "About every shark! I don't need to have my birthday soon now. But how did Santa know? I already wrote my letter."

"It's not from Santa, it's from me," Alan said, ruffling his hair.

"Thanks, Dad," he said, hugging him.

From the rest of his family, he got some shark pajamas, a set of ocean animal bath toys, a shark poster, and a subscription

to a wildlife magazine, but he was most excited about the new book.

Gwen was next. She got a few things of yarn and a set of iridescent blue knitting needles. She put on a drab smile and set them beside her, hurrying me and Hafsa to the tree.

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but I couldn't just do that in front of everyone on Christmas, so I went ahead and got our gifts. We both got lovingly knitted socks, and I got a keychain with my name on it and some magnets from when Gwen and her family went to Niagara Falls. Hafsa got three scarves to wear as a hijab: one with butterflies, one with lions, and one knitted.

Gwen got awkward and laughed a lot about the knitted one. "I don't even know if you can wear it, it's so thick—"

"It's perfect!" she shushed her with a tight hug. "It'll be great for the winter."

Aileen looked at my tiny pile of gifts. "Is that everything for you, Sid?"

"I think so?"

She got up and handed me something I'd missed: a new headset with a microphone, so it was easier to talk to Gwen and Hafsa while I was away.

I was kind of shocked. "This is… Thank you so much!"

She smiled. "I got one for Gwen too. I know you already have your own, Hafsa; now you all have a nice one."

I stopped fiddling with it when I remembered I'd forgotten to give Gwen Ben's bracelet. I ran to her room to grab it while Ava brought her gifts over to the couch, and when I got back, she hadn't opened any.

"You guys didn't need to wait for me," I protested, face flushing.

"Nonsense," Aileen said. "You're part of the family."

Sheepishly taking my seat, I handed the bracelet over to Gwen. "It's from my little cousin. He says he wants to trade for a scarf with as many neon colors as you can do."

She smiled, a little more genuinely this time, and told me she was glad I wasn't leaving for a while. "So I can work on it, I mean."

Ava got a new pair of Docs, which she was embarrassed about, insisting that the old ones that were falling apart were still fine enough to wear, but nobody let her refuse the gift. Among Henry's gifts was a can of bug spray, which seemed to be an inside joke because everyone in their family laughed about it. Aileen and Alan gifted Mr. Chowdhury the exact same crock pot as he did them, which was really funny too. Overall, it was a wonderful morning and I had a good time.

Later that day, I hung out on the couch with Gwen while she sped through knitting the scarf for Ben. I had my arm around her and was watching TV while trying to figure out how to ask what was wrong. She was happy on the surface, invested in her knitting, but it was flimsy, I could tell. And she'd been so off this morning. Then I noticed the final gift tucked in the back under the tree, wrapped in galaxy print wrapping paper.

"Oh, Gwen," I breathed. "I'm sorry."

She glanced up at me, chipper. "What?"

I didn't take my eyes off the gift.

She followed my gaze and her face fell. She shook and then inhaled sharply, trying to speak, but didn't get through her sentence before sobbing.

I pulled her into a hug. "It's okay. It's okay. I'm here."

She cried harder. I wasn't sure if it was because of what I said, but I felt bad.

I kissed the top of her head and murmured, "Hafsa's here, too, and that's where we'll always be. We won't just leave you like that."

When she stopped crying, she stayed in my arms for a while. I didn't try to get her to leave. Aileen gently roused us for dinner a couple hours later, and Gwen was properly happy for the first time in days.

The day after Christmas was mostly spent tidying up wrapping paper and listening to Cole tell us shark facts. Even at dinner, he was still going. It was a big book.

After washing my bowl, my feet made a beeline for the back door. I stood there, staring out into the darkness, feeling it worm its way into my chest and pull.

"Earth to Sid?" Ava said, looking up at me from the couch.

Jarred, I stepped back from the door and blinked at her several times. "What? S-sorry."

"Aileen's talking to you," she said, looking a little concerned.

"You're not going outside like that, are you?" Aileen called from the dining table. "The wind chill is really bad."

"Yeah, you can't leave. I'm telling you about the sharks I learned about."

"I, uh, I just need some fresh air."

"At 7pm?" Gwen asked, her voice weirdly edged.

I tried to laugh it off noncommittally.

"Well, okay, just make sure you put your coat on."

Gwen struggled to sound like she was only jokingly insistent as I crossed the floor to get my coat from the closet. "Don't you wanna stay for this vital shark education?"

"I'll be right back, Gwen," I said, shocking myself with how rudely the words came out. I forced myself to fling the sliding door aside and trudge out onto the snowy porch so I didn't

have to hear or see her heart shattering.

I woke up before Gwen and Hafsa the next day. I'd slept rough, and every dream was full of him. I'd even taken some of Gwen's sleeping medication and it hadn't helped. I didn't know what to do.

Well, no, I did. I just didn't want to do it.

Henry and Alan were already awake, sitting in the living room and watching the news. I gave them the most pleasant good morning that I could, which they took as an invitation to call me over to sit with them. I didn't want to seem rude, so I did. We talked about fishing, how Henry hadn't been away from work long enough to ice fish this winter yet, and how about I come along with them today and we'll get back before lunch, maybe cook up some nice fresh fish as a surprise for Cole. I nodded and laughed and shook my head at all the appropriate times, but I wasn't really there.

I was out on the dock where my gaze fell, and it was summertime, with the warm and muggy air begging me down into the water. It was all around me, teeth in my skin, dragging me under. My head spun and my chest got tight like it had in the bathroom and I felt like I might explode if I didn't do something but I didn't even know what. My eyes went fuzzy. I blinked, and in the darkness his glorious light was there.

"You okay, Sid?" Ava's voice broke through to me.

I jumped and looked up to see her standing in the hallway entrance. "Uh, yeah, sorry, just didn't sleep well," I said, too high pitched, and smiled too hard.

Alan patted my back. "The winter air will do you wonders."

They both got up to go, but I didn't. If I went out on the lake, I was sure I'd end up under the ice somehow. Honestly, if it was the right lake, I didn't know if I'd be upset to go out that way.

Henry waited for me as Alan went to get our coats. "Are you coming with us?"

I choked on my words, so I just made myself nod and roll with it.

Henry caught a hefty panfish within a couple hours, so he and Alan celebrated with a drink that I declined. I wasn't usually so squeamish, but watching the thing flop and writhe, desperate for water and the oxygen within it, was more than enough to turn my stomach. I breathed a sigh of relief when they put it down humanely.

The last days of the year were horrible. The dreams were once again leaking into my waking life. I couldn't look out the window without seeing him out on the lake in the summer sunshine. It was even worse than it had been up north. Being with Gwen and Hafsa, knowing they were beside me every night, was the only thing keeping me here.

When Hafsa and Mr. Chowdhury were packing up to go home on the 31st, Alan and Henry said they'd tail them for a while, because they needed to go into town.

"Hafsa, want me to load your bags up for you?" Henry offered. "So you can spend as much time with Sid and Gwen as you want."

She beamed. "Sure, thanks, Henry."

I thanked him too, inside my mind. I wondered if he knew how badly I didn't want to let her go. Maybe Ava had mentioned our late night encounter or something. Or maybe he'd just gotten better at seeing other people's emotions.

"Why don't I test out my new knitted hijab? Let's go play in the snow."

"Sounds great!"

We got Cole out of his room and made sure he put on good, warm boots after Alan scolded him for trying to put on his shoes.

The four of us were soaked and shivering once Mr. Chowdhury called Hafsa in to leave, but we had an awesome time building two snow forts and having a snowball war.

Hafsa took a shower and changed, bagging up her wet clothes, before saying her long goodbyes and driving off. It was weird to watch her drive away.

Cole was tired, so he took a nap while Aileen started on some of the dishes from last night's dinner. She looked tired, too, so I told her to move over and finished up for her. She hovered and chatted with me and Gwen until Alan and Henry came back.

Henry swung into the kitchen and put two sixes of vodka sodas on the table. Alan came in with another six of beer.

"Oh," I said, kind of surprised. "That's a lot of booze."

Henry laughed at me. "You don't have to drink if you don't want to. More for the cool kids."

I looked at Gwen and she shrugged, saying she did sometimes, but reassuring me that I didn't have to.

Ava came into the room from the hallway, sliding up on silent socked feet to grab a cooler. "Thanks," she said, and disappeared back up to her room.

Gwen grabbed one too. Henry and Alan both took a beer instead.

Aileen patted my shoulder affectionately when I still hesitated. "I don't drink personally, Sid. I mostly spend New Years sleeping," she said with a smile, "but I could put on a movie marathon."

Gwen nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, that would be great, wouldn't it, Sid?"

Aileen swept away to set up Netflix. "I'll find the perfect movie for us."

Gwen took my hand to bring me to the couch. She stopped,

though, when I didn't reach for my own drink, and asked me if I was going to take one.

"Um," I said, glancing at them, "I don't know—"

"Oh, the pink lemonade is delicious, it's my favorite."

Aileen looked over at us. "I think what he's trying to say, honey, is—"

"No," I interrupted her, instantly feeling guilty as I picked up a pink lemonade, "it's fine. I'll try one."

One wouldn't be so bad. It's not like I've never had alcohol before. And it's not like I don't need the distraction.

I woke up at six in the morning, feeling sick to my stomach. I didn't even have that much to drink last night, but I did only sleep for four hours. Crawling out of Gwen's bed, I padded softly across the room, making sure the door didn't make a sound as I shut it. I sulked down the hallway to the bathroom to splash water on my face and brush my teeth.

Looking out the window at the expanse of shimmering water under brilliant blue summer skies, I knew I couldn't do this anymore.

I crept back into Gwen's room and, as silently as I could, got my things together to be ready to leave as soon as possible. Then I went downstairs to wait in the living room for Alan to wake up, but he was already there, making coffee in the kitchen.

"Hey, Sid. You're up early."

"Yeah. I couldn't get back to sleep."

He lifted the coffee pot to me and I nodded. He poured me a mug and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I said, rubbing my eyes blearily with my other hand.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked, looking at me with genuine care.

I couldn't get my throat to open, so I just shook my head.

He patted my shoulder. "Wanna head back to your family's?"

I nodded, feeling outside of myself. I didn't want it to be too troublesome for him, but I couldn't stay here.

"I'll see what I can do about moving the flight. Don't you worry, okay? Just drink that and relax."

Everyone was happy to see me come back, even though I was early. I was happy to be there, too. Being stationary, not consumed by my work, had brought the dreams to a scary new high. Here, though, surrounded by the dogs and the constant responsibility, I could numb it out.

I could. I'd try harder this time.

I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom one evening, trying to avoid looking at the massive dark circles under my eyes, when Aunt Serena came in. She started taking off her makeup. She loved wearing elaborate makeup even though she mostly just did the paperwork and didn't go out much, unless it was to do repairs on the buildings. It was one of the things Grandma Fran always made sure to send her, along with pony beads for Ben.

"How was your day?" I asked her after I rinsed.

She looked at me in the mirror, clearly concerned, lowering her baby wipe.

I put my toothbrush away, trying not to look ashamed.

"My day was fine, Sid. I'm worried about your day," she said. "You haven't been well lately. It's okay to be unwell, but you've been a model Kautyayuq, sleeping out with the dogs like we've banished you. You can come in and get some love," she said, opening her arms for a hug.

I put away my shame and hugged her tightly. She rocked me and rubbed my back. After a good long while, I let go. She smiled at me, looking funny with half her makeup still on, and

brushed my hair out of my eyes.

"You can always talk to us, you know," she reminded me. "No matter what's troubling you, we're going to support you and give you the help you need."

I nodded solemnly. I did know that, but I was scared. It was still too hard to face. "Thank you, Aunt Serena."

I thought about it all night. I had to do something about this, but what? I started with figuring out how to tell them about the white kelpie.

Sighing, I sat up and pushed my blankets away. I needed fresh air. I got my coat, boots, and mittens, which I kept by the back door, and stepped out into the kennel. Many of the dogs stirred when I closed the door, so I tried to be quieter when I stepped out into the run. I didn't want to wake anyone else.

Pukak, one of the older dogs, was pawing at the door and whining. I could tell it was him because he had a funny whine that sounded like a baby crying. I let him out and he bounded around me, wagging his tail. We chased each other for a bit until I was tired and ready to sleep, then I let us in, going right to bed.

As I was closing the back door, I could hear that lonely keen, curling into the frigid air. I tried to pretend it was the wind. I really did.

In the morning, it dawned on me that I could just not tell them who it was that I was missing. The realization did not come as much of a comfort, though. The thought of talking about him, putting those damning words into the air even in anonymity, made me sick.

I did the dishes after breakfast, listening to music on my phone. I was alone in the house, mostly. Paula, Andy, and Taamusi were all out on tours. Ben was visiting a friend, Mary

was doing some housekeeping in the motel, and Daisy-Anne was taking a shower. Serena was out back, fixing part of the run's fence that had fallen down in the night. That must have been what made the noise, I decided.

Drying my hands, I thought about how to tell Hafsa and Gwen. I was certain that I wouldn't tell them the whole truth. But I hadn't been speaking to them as frequently as I should have been, and I knew it would only get harder from here on out. Gwen had already texted me a few times, worried about me.

I leaned on the kitchen counter while I tried out several messages. I could easily lie and say work was busy, but I felt too bad doing that. I could say I'd gotten sick, and I guess that wasn't lying exactly, but it was still not true.

Sid: Hey Hafsa, I'm sorry I haven't been around much. I'm going through a rough patch, but I'll be okay. I'm going to stay less talkative until I feel like I can handle that again. I love you, don't worry about me.

That would have to do.

She texted me back a few minutes later.

Hafsa: i love you too Sid. don't hide anything bad from me… i would hate if you were suffering alone. if there's any way i can help you i want to know.

I finished tweaking the message for Gwen before responding.

Sid: What would help me the most is giving me time.

Hafsa: i understand, but please, please don't be afraid to reach out.

Sid: I won't be, I promise.

Hafsa: thank you, i love you.

Sid: I love you too.

Then Gwen responded.

Gwen: do u still love me?

I was floored.

Sid: Of course I do!

Gwen: but u don't want to talk to us about your problems… even when u were over for christmas u were so weird and distant. u literally packed your bags while i was sleeping…

Gwen: i'm here for u, but it feels like u dont even know that.

Sid: I do know, but I have to do this by myself. I promise it's nothing scary, and I'll be alright.

It took a while for her next text to come in. I was worried. I knew she was upset.

Gwen: is it something ive done?

Sid: No, not at all, Gwen. Not Hafsa either. You two are wonderful. You've been nothing but supportive of me. It's just some personal stuff that's been weighing on me. It's not about you or us at all.

She was relieved, apologized, and was much more calm knowing that. I made sure she knew she could always ask me for reassurance, then Mary came inside, so I felt a little self conscious and put my phone away.

She smiled at me after hanging up her coat. "Everything alright, cousin?"

I nodded, then shrugged dejectedly. "I don't know…"

"What's on your mind?"

I stumbled around telling her that I had been troubled by thoughts and dreams of someone who I missed greatly. I didn't want to tell her about the hallucinations, just as much as I didn't want to tell her who— or what— he was.

She looked thoughtful. She crossed the room to hug me and press her nose to my cheek lovingly. "I think you should talk to our parents," she said. "They'll know what to do."

Over the next several weeks, the adults coordinated their

schedules to give me an hour of their collective, devoted time. That was a big deal. It was nearly April now, so tours were in high demand, even without us taking part in the races that were fast approaching. Mary, Daisy-Anne, and Ben all had to take care of work around the property: cleaning both our home and the small motel, cooking for the guests, and taking calls. Mary was training under Serena, so she took care of the paperwork, but she tried to do a bit of everything too. I tried to tell her that she didn't need to, that I could fit a lot of household chores into my schedule, but she wouldn't have it. I was glad when I was able to sit down with my aunts and uncles so things could go back to normal.

I told them everything I could. That I'd had a short but intense relationship with someone a few years ago, before Gwen and Hafsa, and that I'd gotten no closure. That it was eating me alive from the inside out.

Andy and his wife shared a knowing look, then he asked me if I had any way to contact this person.

"I know where to find him, yes," I said.

"Then I think you should try to find him, and get your closure," he said. "Clearly it's important to you, to put this to rest."

Even though I kind of expected them to say that, I felt guilty. "I don't want to leave you," I said quietly. "Not now, when it's so busy."

Andy and Paula talked quietly for a minute, then consulted Serena, then Taamusi. Finally, Andy told me that it would be okay if I left closer to the summer.

"We can get you a flight in June," Paula said.

"Oh, I can pay for it myself, it's okay," I said in a rush.

"No no, it's alright. We had money saved to send you home anyway," Serena said with a lighthearted laugh. "We love you

but we didn't plan to keep you up here forever."

"And you're always welcome back," Taamusi said, reaching across the kitchen table to hold my hand. "You've been an amazing addition to our home and you know we would steal you back if you ever wanted that."

Paula smiled slyly. "I'll let my little brother know that if you ever go missing, he should give me and my husband a call."

We all laughed and I got up to get a hug from Serena. They fussed over me for a bit, telling me how much they cared about me and how great it was to have me here. Paula promised to send me daily updates on my puppies when I'm gone, too.

Then we all had to go back to work, and that was life until June fifteenth, when I piled into the truck with Taamusi and Daisy-Anne, who had insisted on coming, and was driven to the airport. Daisy-Anne talked to me the whole way. We sat together in the back and she gave me a complete list of things that she wanted me to do before I came back, because I was coming back: get Uncle John to make more traditional recipes, convince Grandma Fran and Uncle John to get a dog for me, watch all her favorite movies that she didn't get to show me and tell her what I think of them, and enjoy my new ability to go out in shorts in an Ontario winter.

"If you're gone for that long," she said.

Taamusi laughed heartily in the front seat. "Maybe he wants to have Christmas with his girlfriends at his house this time, Daisy-Anne."

"Girlfriend and partner," I corrected.

"Girlfriend and partner."

"You'd better send us something then," Daisy-Anne teased. Then she whispered to me, "Especially if you're going back to that magical place."

I winked at her and she grinned.

The flight went by fast. I slept through this one too, dreaming of him again. Swimming with him in the cool, moonlit lake, our bodies nearly one. An abundance of light. There was nothing frightening now. I knew deep within me that I was doing the right thing.

When I arrived in Ottawa, however, it hit me that I had no idea what I was doing. Even though I knew the white kelpie would be in Shimmering Lake, and I knew that Shimmering Lake was in Silent Woods, that's… All I knew. Both times I'd gone, it had been in that living bus. Sitting with my head in my hands in the airport lobby, I tried desperately to remember what Ripley had said, what Shebal had said, what any of them had said.

How do you get to Silent Woods?

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I jumped, turning around to see who it was.

They were tall, long-limbed, and dressed in vibrantly colored translucent silks. They were bald, had a wide mouth, and strange, round, strikingly red eyes that protruded from their face. Their skin, too, was odd: bright, leafy green, with cream on their throat, the front of their torso, and the insides of their arms and legs. A long tail twisted around one leg.

"Can… Can I help you?" I struggled to say. How did nobody else seem to notice how strange this person looked?

"No, but I think I can help you," they said in a deep, reverberating voice. "Where do you need a lift to, exactly?"

"… Shimmering Lake."

They tapped their chin with a long finger. "That's a little out of my way, but… Oh, Big and Little Gus are there. I can do that. Come on," they gestured for me to get my things and follow

them. "Besides, I don't think anyone else is going to help you."

Stunned, but trying to be optimistic, I collected my few bags and followed them to where they'd parked their trailer. It was pulled by an old but well cared for Volkswagen bus, painted just as green as their skin. The bus had wraparound seats and a double door on one side. They helped me put my stuff in the back. Someone was in there, sleeping: a real, live anthropomorphic lemur wearing swim trunks and an LCD Soundsystem shirt.

"Don't mind Nic," they said. "He can sleep through anything. Do you want to sit up front with me, or back here?"

"Up front, please," I said.

We climbed in and they navigated their way out of the parking lot.

I awkwardly introduced myself. "Um, my name's Sid."

"Nice to meet you," they said. "You can call me Ro. It's easier to pronounce than my full name."

After a while, I said, "Can I ask what you are?"

"I'm a leaf elf. But I know I look like a frog. I'm part frog." They winked at me, their eyelids sticking together slightly. "Why do you want to be at Shimmering Lake?"

"I figured you'd know, since you knew I needed you."

They shook their head. "It's a feeling I get. I've done this before. Helped people get to places they should be, but don't understand how to get to yet."

"I…" I swallowed, almost nervous. "I left someone there who I maybe shouldn't have."

They tilted their head at me thoughtfully, and I noticed that not only were they bald, they had no eyebrows. "Sounds complicated."

I shrugged. I didn't know how much I should be telling this

stranger about my life, so I changed the subject. "Where were you going before?"

"I was at the airport because I knew someone was going to need my help again. But before that, I was taking Nic home from a concert."

"Where do you live?" I couldn't imagine they lived in Ottawa.

"That's a bit forward."

"I'm sorry."

They laughed, a strange sound. "It's okay, I'm only teasing. We live in downtown Katacula. It's a university town, and it has a crazy downtown core. Lots of stuff going on, very exciting to live there. We're not students, so we weren't supposed to live there, but it's the best place for us. I got lucky and won our apartment on a bet."

"A bet?"

They nodded. "Here's our turn," they said, and peeled off onto an exit that nobody else seemed to be taking. It went right into the trees on the side of the road.

"Are you sure?" I asked, then figured I shouldn't question Ro. I had to accept things now. When I looked through the back window, the exit had vanished, swallowed up by the trees.

We drove for a while, quiet aside from Nic's snoring. I wondered where exactly we were, relative to the rest of the world. This place, the Woods, had been described to me as somewhere under, beside, and above the world. Frankly, I didn't know what that meant. I wondered what it was like to go deeper, to places like Nic and Ro had been. I was going to ask, but I felt that would be insensitive or prying, so I asked instead how long we'd be.

The road changed before my eyes. We were closing in on a familiar lake. Night had fallen suddenly, seemingly, and the

forest was full of summer sounds.

"Oh," I said.

Ro smiled. "Still surprising for you, huh? That the Woods does what it wants for you."

"Yeah…" I trailed off as we pulled up to the shop, then I opened my door. "Thank you again for the ride. Is there any way I can pay you back?"

Ro paused, then laughed. "Don't make a habit of asking that of people like me," they said. "I do this for free. Not everyone else will be so kind."

I didn't really know what to say to that, so I just thanked them again. I hovered in the parking lot as they went into the shop, leaving Nic sleeping. It would be nice to say hi to the orc and gnome couple, but the thought of spending any longer away from the water made me sick to my stomach. I'd been pushing it to the back of my mind for months. Years. So close I could hold the lake in my lungs, it was unbearable.

Alternating between running and walking, I made my way up the road to the corner, then all the way down to the small, gravelly lot where the bridge was. The bridge still looked the same as always, its dark wood a little wet and creaky. I crossed carefully, leaving my bags on the shore. I could see all of the buildings on the island, and they all had their lights out. Nobody was here yet. But the other island was still populated, of course. I could only hope the catfolk and lakefellows were asleep. It would be the last straw if I got so close and someone got in the way of me seeing him.

Walking across the clearing, between the empty, silent buildings, was otherworldly. In equal parts, I remembered how much fun I'd had here, and how strange and frightening things were too. It was all better now, but the memories still hurt.

My steps slowed. Was I really ready for this again? It hadn't been all that long ago that I was almost attacked by yet another kelpie, too. What ifs swirled around my head, making me unsteady on my feet, but I was already here. I may as well finish things.

Feeling too exposed in the open, I hurried to the trees. I found myself automatically following the same old path I'd taken so many nights back then: between the cabins, up through the trees to the big rock, a little further down a soft slope and out onto the small, secret beach that was littered with glittery shells.

I walked across the sand, cautious but barely sure of what, gradually shedding my clothes as I went. I knew I was going to end up in that water. The tears didn't come until I closed my eyes, but they came.

It had been so long. It had been so long but too recently that I had almost died in this lake.

Everything came back.

His lonely wailing. The many walks down here. The one walk that brought me right to the shore, when it wasn't him. It was my mom, but not her; it was a kelpie's mouth full of hunger, dragging me down. It was the almost drowning, the almost dying, the being saved. Pulled to the shore by both Hafsa the lion and the white kelpie whose name I didn't even know.

Two so different from me, two who I loved, one who I could never get back.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them again I couldn't see through the tears. I wanted to sob, I wanted to scream that it wasn't fair, I wanted to whistle to him like I'd whistled to that other wild kelpie in that other terrifying swamp years ago, but I didn't want anyone to hear. So I did what I had to. I went into the water.

Below the surface, I could feel the pressure all around me, hear the pulse of the lake. It took me a few moments to open my eyes. I swam along the lakebed, not going far from the shore, looking out into the gloom for the kelpie. My kelpie. It couldn't be that difficult to spot a white horse in a dark lake. But there was nothing, nothing. All I saw were the shadows of fish and water plants, playing tricks in front of my face.

As the moments dragged on and it got harder to hold my breath, I realized how stupid this whole thing was. Not even just looking underwater for him, but coming out here in the first place. He's gone. He could be anywhere.

He could be… He could be dead.

Maybe all those dreams, all those hallucinations… Maybe that had been his ghost, come to say goodbye. Come to get revenge, come to haunt me for leaving him behind.

My chest and ribs ached. It was suddenly very difficult to keep my mouth shut and not let water into my lungs. I pushed off the bottom, but something yanked me back down. Cold panic ran through me. Something had wrapped itself around my leg. I couldn't tell if it was alive or not, but no matter how I flailed and kicked, it wasn't letting me go. I clawed at the water overhead, trying to get a grip on the air, but I was deeper than I thought. I couldn't get free.

I could hold my breath for a long time, but not this long. My vision blurred and blackened, spots of yellow and white blinding me. All I could hear was my pounding heart.

Yes, he must be dead, he must be a ghost. He must be angry for having been scorned. He'd lured me back to the lake to take what was his.

It was over.

Then, clear as day, his long, lovely keening. It rose above my

heart, above the water, above the pull of unconsciousness.

Yeah, I must be dying. How else could I explain this? It's really too bad, but I guess it is fitting.

A massive rush of water, followed by a heavy weight from below me, snapped me back to wakefulness. The surface broke over my head and I gasped for air, ugly and desperate, as I was pushed to shore. I kept my eyes closed, but my hands found his neck. My fingers tangled in his mane. He didn't stop until I was on the sand, where I was able to crawl backwards and flop down onto the bank, coughing the water out of me. My chest heaved as I got all the oxygen back in my body.

A few moments passed before I had the will to open my eyes. He was standing beside me, gently breathing into my hair. Starry sky, and nothing but, framed him. It didn't feel real. He still felt like a ghost.

I coughed again, ragged. When I was still, he brushed my cheek with his muzzle and I shuddered. There was nothing ghostly about his warmth, his solidness. I exhaled shakily into his nostrils. He clicked softly and I wondered how to ask him what I needed to.

It had been years. The last time we spoke, the last time I saw him, I'd basically run away. The time before that, too. Did I tell him about my life now, with Gwen and Hafsa, with my cousins? Did I ask him if he missed me? Did I tell him I hadn't been able to sleep a night in months without seeing his beautiful blue eyes, without waking up feeling like I was drowning? Did I tell him I had been convinced, however momentarily, that he had drawn me out here to kill me?

Did I tell him I loved him, still?

Reaching up, I stroked his long nose and realized there was nothing to be said. We understood. We had always understood.

And maybe, just maybe, we weren't as far apart as we felt.

Big Surprises

It was a late spring day like any other in Ottawa: it was pouring, lighting was flashing, and Ronnie and Barclay were hanging out with their friends in their brand new apartment.

They'd moved at the start of May, and it was now nearly June, but this was their first housewarming party. It had taken them the whole month to fix the place up how they liked it.

The closet in the entryway had posters of Sonic the Hedgehog, Diablo, and classic Super Mario, and their welcome mat was a rainbow. The bathroom, right off the front hall, was very tidy and clean, but full of kitschy 2000s ocean themed decor, including a full sparkly seascape with leaping dolphins for a shower curtain, seashell candles on the counter, a lobster bathmat, and sticky sea creature shapes pressed onto the mirror. The kitchen, to the left of the door, was also in perfect condition, and not decorated too much, aside from having Garfield table runners on the classy black dining table, and plenty of specialized cooking gadgets for Barclay to use. In the living room, they'd kept Barclay's old bunk bed to use as his work station, with project storage above; that was tucked beside the dishwasher against the far wall. Barclay's sectional was turned to face the balcony, and the coffee table sat on top of a beautiful traditional Mongolian rug featuring a dragon.

The floor pillows were still there too. They had a TV tucked into the nook in the wall opposite Barclay's work station, with their gaming systems and DVD player hooked up. On the wall behind the couch, and the ceiling above, were many of Barclay's tapestries, the rest being in the bedroom. They had their bedroom door closed, though, because it was still a bit of a disaster in there. They were still figuring out how to organize their shelf and desk with all of Ronnie's trinkets, Little Beast's tank, and Barclay's records.

Before their friends came over, they'd spent ages putting together snacks for everyone: tons of little meat-filled bansh, round boortsog with honey, a cheese and deli meat platter, and a veggie platter with broccoli, cauliflower, and baby carrots. Of course, Barclay had made the Mongolian food himself, insisting on making it perfect like his dad's. Ronnie had made his mom's lemonade, minus the blood, of course.

Finally, it was 6pm, and Laurie was buzzed in. Barclay fussed around final details as she rode the elevator up. Ronnie was sad to see that she didn't have Morgan and Cherry with her; apparently Cherry wasn't feeling well and Morgan was staying home with her for moral support.

Laurie barely had her shoes off before the next buzz came. This time, it was Laurie's friend Ram. She and Barclay had gotten close over the past couple years and he was super excited to have her see the place.

"I'm so glad you invited Ram!" Laurie said as she tucked her smart black raincoat into the closet. "I love that you two are such good friends."

"She's a wonderful girl," Barclay said.

Laurie did a double take as she closed the closet door and saw the posters. She said she has the same Sonic poster at home.

Ronnie stuck out his tongue at her from the couch. "I could've guessed you're a Sonic fan, nerd."

"Hey!" she laughed, walking over and taking in the rest of the apartment. "Wow, this place is amazing. And that view! I didn't believe it at first when you told me you were moving to LeBreton Flats."

"It is really cool, eh?" Ronnie grinned. "It's one of the cheapest units in the building, so we really lucked out. We're working our asses off for this, though."

Barclay's business was doing well enough that he'd been able to change his shifts at Herb & Spice to on call. Ronnie had scored a decent job at Happy Goat, and every once in a while he worked nights at the 24/7 native weed store really close to Barclay's work. Both of them working two jobs was kind of crazy, but it wasn't all the time.

When Ram came in, she handed Barclay a big Tupperware of lamb biryani, which he was overjoyed about. They loved each other's cooking. Barclay took Ram to the kitchen and started showing her all his kitchen gadgets.

"Hey," said a new voice from the doorway.

Ronnie whipped around on the couch to see Journee standing there awkwardly. "Oh! Hey," he said, scrambling over the back of the couch to greet her.

"Ram let me in," she said with a bit of a laugh. "So, uh, nice place."

"Thanks." He tried to smile.

They'd settled things years ago— it had turned out that Journee was publicly flirting with Ronnie in an attempt to make her boyfriend at the time, Parker, jealous, since Journee was convinced he was cheating on her with his coworker. That turned out to not even be true, but the damage was done to

their relationship. Parker stayed friends with Morgan, Journee stayed friends with Cherry and everyone else, and had made amends with Ronnie… But the two of them still didn't quite know what to do around each other.

Laurie swept in to save them, pulling Journee to the window to look out at the storm over the city below. At the same time, the next buzz came: Ripley was here! He was the only other person who they'd invited and had been available today. They'd also invited Abigail, two of Barclay's friends who he'd met at the art markets he tabled at, and one of Ronnie's friends from work, but two of them were sick and the other two were out of town. Ram's boyfriend, Keshaun, and Abigail's partner, Adi, had also been invited, but Adi was with Abigail and Keshaun was stuck at work.

Ronnie was really looking forward to seeing Ripley. It had been a long time since they'd both been in town and free at the same time, with all the adventures in Silent Woods he had been having with his family. When the knock at the door came, he jumped up to let him in and gave him a big hug.

Even though Ronnie had been changing so much over the years— letting his hair grow out, cutting it, letting it grow again, experimenting more and more with feminine clothing and makeup— Ripley was pretty much the same: he still wore a big t shirt, cargo shorts, and a jean jacket with pins and patches, still had a poofy green afro mohawk, and was still his exuberantly excited self. But now, after top surgery and several years of testosterone, he was visibly a lot stronger, had a scrappy beard and mustache, and his baby face had become a little more grown up and masculine.

Since everyone was here now, Barclay and Ronnie took the group on a quick tour of the space, and then they gathered

around the coffee table to eat, drink, and chat.

"How has everyone been?" Laurie asked, perched on the back of the couch. "It's been forever since we've all been in the same room together!"

"It seriously has been," Ram said. "Ripley, I don't think we've ever met in person. It's so good to put a face to a name."

He flashed his signature bright smile. "Likewise! I love your dress."

"Isn't it lovely? Abigail made it for me."

"She's so good at sewing. And so reliable!" Laurie commented. "The other day, Morgan was watering the plants and fell, and accidentally ripped the front curtains trying to catch herself. Abigail was over that afternoon to fix them."

"Oh no, is Morgan okay?" Ripley's brow creased with worry. "Is that why she isn't here today?"

"Oh, no, no, she's fine. Cherry was just throwing up this morning and Morgan's back at home keeping her company." Laurie looked worried, too. "It was probably something she ate… She went to dinner with her mom last night. I hope her mom isn't sick too."

"I can do a pharmacy run when we all head out," Journee offered.

"It's okay, don't worry about it. We're well stocked at home," Laurie said. "Thanks, though."

The conversation wandered to what Ripley had been up to on his road trips, and the details of it kept blowing Ram's mind. She'd known for four or five years that Morgan's a werewolf and Ronnie's a vampire, but hearing stories of him finding towns haunted by monsters, hunting them down to categorize and analyze them, and ultimately work with them and the locals to live more at peace… It was always so wonderful and awesome

to hear, even for Ronnie.

Journee started asking him questions. She had been dabbling in witchcraft for several years, making protection sigils and using crystals for luck, tranquility, and healing, but even Parker didn't know if it was actually doing anything.

"Well, witchcraft isn't my area of expertise," Ripley admitted, "but I'd have to say it probably is doing something. Our friend Hafsa might have better answers about that sort of thing. She uses magic to shapeshift!"

Eventually, things steered towards road trip shenanigans in general, and how they'd all like to go on one together someday, whether it was through Silent Woods or a more normal destination. There were so many cool things all across North America!

As their conversations split into pairs, Ram and Laurie started chatting about their latest forays into interesting new fashion: Ram had ordered a dress from Lolita Glow, and Laurie was looking for vintage letterman jackets and golf hats.

"Would you be interested in golf pants too?" Ronnie asked, overhearing. "I actually have a couple pairs that I don't want."

"What? You have golf pants?" she laughed, covering her mouth with a hand. "Sorry, that came out so rude, I just could not picture you dressed like that."

His cheeks flushed. "Me neither. I kinda went through a phase of, uh, trying to be more masc, I guess."

Ram shot him a gentle look, but maybe he was just looking into it too much. "You look great today, Ronnie. I've seen your selfies lately, you look more confident all the time."

He was really blushing now. He had to look away. "Thanks," he murmured.

"If you ever need tips about more feminine fashion," she said,

"shoot me a message. It feels crazy to say that… It does not feel like I've been out for five years."

"Six, isn't it?" Laurie corrected. "Maybe even seven. I can't remember."

Her eyes widened and she puffed out her cheeks. "Yeah, wow, time really flies."

"The pandemic did not help."

"You look happy," Ronnie said, but got embarrassed immediately. "I mean, uh, I didn't know you well before, but you seem really happy now."

She smiled warmly. "Thank you. I really am."

Just then, both Laurie and Ronnie's phones dinged with a text, then several more in a row. Shock flashed on both of their faces as they read the messages.

Laurie looked up and fixed her eyes on Ronnie. She stammered, then asked, "Is there somewhere I can take a phone call? Like can I step into the bathroom or?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," he said, pointing towards the front door. "It's that door there, beside the closet."

She nodded and swung over the back of the couch, apologizing quietly to Ram.

Ronnie also whispered an apology as he got up and hurried to the bedroom. He gave Barclay a thumbs up as he noticed him watching him leave.

Shutting the door softly behind him, he called Morgan.

"Hey," she said breathlessly as she immediately picked up. "Uh."

"Hey. Yeah."

She was silent for a few beats.

"Let's talk about this."

"What is there to say?" she said, her voice breaking.

"Cherry's… She's…"

"The test had two lines."

"Yep. Yeah."

"I thought you were on…?"

"N-no, I went off HRT a little while ago. I, uh, I got where I wanted to be and I w-wanted to— does it matter?"

"Well, if you've been on HRT, you shouldn't be able to—"

"But it happened! It happened anyway."

Ronnie let out a shaky breath. "Let's take a deep breath, okay?"

"Y-yeah. Sorry. Yeah." Her breath came staticky through the phone speaker for a moment. "Sorry. I'm just really overwhelmed. I didn't think this could happen…"

"She can still get a more accurate test at the doctor's," he pointed out, "but let's think about it as though it is happening. Then you'll be ready to face whatever the doctor says."

"That makes sense…"

"What's the most overwhelming part of this?"

She scoffed in shock. "I don't want to be a parent!"

"W-well, you never know, you three may not decide to ke—"

"I don't know if I actually mean that," she interrupted. "I… I've never thought about it? Not happening now, at least. I didn't think I'd have to think about it for a long time. I d-don't think it's a bad thing, I'm just scared. I'm just scared, you know?"

"I know… Do you wanna talk about the scariest part of it?"

"I…" She was silent for a while. "I don't want to mess up a kid like Mommy messed me up."

"God, yeah… Yeah. I know what you mean. I'm scared of that too. If I ever have a kid, I mean."

"We're still so young," she went on, stress straining her voice. "I mean, I've had coworkers my age who're starting to get married and have kids now— and that's another thing, we aren't

even engaged, I don't know if we're ever gonna get married because, well, how would that even work, but…" She groaned. "And I don't even have a steady job! Cherry and Laurie do, but everything I try just falls apart. I keep getting fired or quitting and I don't even know what I want to do with my life. I can't decide anything about my life, let alone another person's! How am I supposed to be a good mother?"

Ronnie stroked the phone as if he could stroke her arm to soothe her. He knew exactly how she felt. He had no idea she'd been struggling in the same ways that he did, but that's not this conversation. He softly told her they'd work together on this, the three of them, and she'd never be alone in any of it. "You've got me, too, and Barclay… And Parker, Ripley, Abigail, Adi, Ram, Keshaun… Everyone."

She sobbed quietly for a few minutes before thanking him.

"Always, Morgan. You're my friend."

"Cherry's telling Laurie now," she said, sniffling. "It's… It's Cherry's choice, ultimately. She said she doesn't know what she wants to do. Not yet." She blew her nose. "She said her job comes first. She doesn't wanna be… Like, she doesn't wanna be a young mom whose future gets derailed for her kid."

"That doesn't have to be how it goes," Ronnie reassured her. "And it's all your choice in the end, isn't it?"

"W-well, it's Cherry's first."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Whatever happens," Ronnie said, "you're gonna be okay. All of you. You've got each other, and you've got us. We'll get through this together."

"Th-thank you," she mumbled. "Um, Cherry's off the phone now… She wants to talk to me. S-sorry for—"

"Don't apologize for anything."

She gave a halfhearted laugh. "Okay."

"Want me to stop by later?"

"Maybe in a couple days? After we go to the doctor."

"Sure. Whenever you're ready."

"Okay… I've gotta go now."

"Yeah, okay. Tell Cherry I'm here for her no matter what. Give her a hug for me."

She puffed a little breath and Ronnie could hear the smile in her voice as she said, "I will. Thanks, Ronnie. Bye."

"Bye." He pressed the phone to his chest and stared blankly ahead of him for a few moments before he was able to turn around and open the door.

Laurie had stepped out of the bathroom around the same time that he had left his bedroom. All eyes were on them and her face was beet red.

"So, uh," she started, smiling nervously, "we've got some big news…"

The End

"I can't do this anymore, Sid," Hafsa sobbed. "I don't know what to do."

"Wow," Sid breathed, shaking his head as he rubbed his girlfriend's shoulder comfortingly. "I had no idea it was that bad between you two. I mean, she's… She's been immature with me, for sure, but…"

Sid and Hafsa were sitting in his bedroom, five days after Sid had been at Shimmering Lake. They weren't discussing his trip; Hafsa had come over to get away from spending time with Gwen after she'd said some cruel— unintentional, but still cruel— things about her and her human parents. In talking about it, she revealed everything else she had been struggling with for the past five years… Longer, too, because lots of these problems didn't start when they started dating. No, that change had only made things worse.

Sid had been feeling this way, too, for a while. He had missed their anniversary last year, since he'd been up north with his family. It had been an utter disaster in their polycule group chat. Then, she'd… He hated to use this word, but she had manipulated him into spending the holidays with her instead of staying with his family like he'd looked forward to for years. Now, after they'd spent so much money to send him back down

to Ontario, he didn't know when he'd get to go back. And they both knew how many times she'd said something weird about their cultures, or their genders, or Hafsa's family… This was not the first time.

As Hafsa went on to talk about how much she's been hurting, how much she's been sweeping under the rug just to keep them all together because she's seen firsthand how poorly Gwen handles conflict and rejection, Sid grew more and more upset. This had gone on far too long. He never should have sat by and let this happen. He'd been too cowardly to confront Gwen in any real way, and it hadn't just been affecting him… He'd let his inaction cause Hafsa so much more pain than he had realized.

"I think we have to break up with her," he blurted.

Hafsa looked up at him, her eyes big and shining with tears. Her twisted frown trembled as she tried to form a response. Without words, she nodded, covering her face as she started to sob again.

Sid put his arms around her and whispered comfortingly to her. He fought back his own tears as he apologized for how long this had dragged on for.

"Don't— don't do that right now," she mumbled. "This is hard enough as it is. We'll talk about that later."

Sid sucked in a breath. "Okay. Fair. I'm sorry."

She leaned away, raising her hands and shaking her head. Distressed, she said, "No, like, we're— we're fine, it would be crazy hypocritical of me if I was upset with you for— for doing exactly what I've been doing in this stupid relationship. I'm not mad at you. Promise. We'll just— we gotta talk about that later. This is way too much all at once."

He nodded, trying not to apologize again as he put aside his feelings about the situation. She was right, this was way too

much.

Hafsa steadied herself and got right down to business, planning with Sid how best to tackle this. They both knew she wouldn't be able to handle being broken up with over text, especially not by both of them at once. They dodged around the obvious answer, but couldn't avoid it forever. They had to go to her house and do this in person.

Once the idea had solidified her mind, Hafsa was unstoppable. She splashed her face with water, corraled Sid into the car, slammed a Gorillaz CD into the disc drive, and drove.

Sid tried to strike up a conversation, but she shushed him, only to ask him if he wanted Tim Horton's a few minutes later.

"Yes please," he said.

She crawled through the drive though, knowing their orders already, then peeled out onto the highway again. With her skill of finding secret roads, their coffees were still steaming when she pulled onto Gwen's driveway.

Ava's car was there too. She had moved out last month to live with Genette in Ottawa. Sid knew Genette wasn't here, because she always told him what she was up to, so he wondered why Ava was back… If there was already tension in the house, this could be catastrophic for Gwen.

He and Hafsa shared a look that told him she'd come to the same conclusion.

"We have to do this no matter what," she said. "Right?"

"Right."

Together, they stepped out of the car and walked up to the house. Before either of them could knock, Ava opened the door, glowering at the ground as she stepped over the threshold. She startled when she realized they were there, pulling her hand from her jeans pocket quickly.

"Oh, uh, hey, what are you— are you here for, for Gwen? Did she ask you to come?" Ava's tone sounded almost accusatory.

Hafsa furrowed her brows and gave her a sidelong stare. "What—?"

Ava shook herself and apologized profusely. "That sounded way more rude than I meant it. Sorry, there's just… This is kind of a bad time."

"We can come back," Sid said, but Hafsa was louder.

"We just need to talk to Gwen."

Ava's face reddened. "Um… Okay. Will it be quick?"

Hafsa glanced at Sid. "It can be."

Sid wasn't so sure.

Ava sighed through her nose and thumped her fist against her jeans pocket. "Okay, I guess you can go in. But I'm warning you, it's, uh, it's not— it's a bad time."

Sid believed her. He had never seen Ava this flustered.

Stepping inside, Sid expected it to look like there had been an explosion, but everything looked exactly as it always did. Aileen, Alan, and Cole weren't there— Ava told them that they'd gone to the beach— but Henry and Gwen weren't downstairs either. The first floor was eerily still as they walked to the spiral staircase.

"Henry?" Ava called up the stairs. "Henry!"

"What?"

"Can you come down here for a minute?"

"Why?"

"Well, um, Sid and Hafsa are here."

"Oh, shit," he said emphatically. There was more, but Sid couldn't make it out, then a door opening and slamming shut. Heavy footsteps, then Henry was descending the stairs. He looked as pissed as he sounded, and Hafsa visibly steeled herself

as he asked why there were here.

"They're here to talk to Gwen," Ava answered for them.

"I figured that out," Henry spat.

"It isn't your business anyway," Hafsa said, but she didn't push past him.

Henry seemed to size her up, his eyes bloodshot and his face red. He raised a hand to point at her, bouncing it in the air, like he wanted to tell her something.

"Henry," Ava said, tense. "Don't."

He cast her a slow glare, then said, like the words were hard to get out, "You two are in for a fucking gongshow."

"Whatever," Hafsa hissed, slipping between the two siblings and starting up the stairs.

Sid followed her with his head down, unnerved. It was like they knew they'd come to break things off… Was Gwen planning to do the same? That made no sense. Sid had long known it wouldn't be Gwen who ends things.

Standing outside her door, Hafsa was the one who knocked. There was no answer for a moment, though they could hear muffled sobs. Hafsa raised her fist to knock again, but the door opened, and they were face to face with Gwen, who had clearly been crying for hours. Her face was red and streaked with tears and snot, and her long hair was matted and wet.

"What do you want?" she seethed.

Hafsa's eyebrows flew up and she took a half step back, looking between her and Sid. "Woah. Nice to see you too."

She rolled her eyes. "Cut the shit, Hafsa. I know why you're here."

Sid was dumbfounded. What was happening right now?

"Great, I guess we can go home then." Hafsa turned and started to walk down the hallway. "Right, Sid?"

"Wait, wait," he found his voice, "don't you want to know why?" He looked at Hafsa. "Don't you think she deserves to know why?"

Gwen groaned, tearing at her hair. "Don't you think I got enough from Henry already?! He can tell you why!" She whirled around, grabbing her door to slam it shut, but Sid caught it and kept it open.

"What do you mean?" he asked, trying to keep his voice as level as possible.

"W-what do you mean?" Gwen shot back, unable to look at him, still holding onto the door. "He and Ava must have told you about Kyle."

"Kyle?" Hafsa scoffed, turning around and marching back to her door. "Who the fuck is Kyle?"

Gwen froze up. Her face drained of color and she became very still, eyes wide, pupils in pinpoints staring at the floor. A smile crept across her face and she said in her usual cheery voice, "Nobody."

"Don't pull that shit on me," Hafsa growled, throwing the door open. "Who the fuck is Kyle?"

Sid whispered to his girlfriend, "Does it matter, baby? We can make this much quicker if w—"

"Of course it matters, Sid!" Tears sprang to her eyes and her voice broke. "Are you cheating on me, Gwen? Is that who Kyle is?"

Gwen laughed, sharp and loud and sudden. "What gives you that idea?"

"I've been cheated on before! I know this stupid game—"

"You were cheated on?" Gwen snorted, rolling her eyes. "When you were what, thirteen? That hardly counts."

Hafsa's face twisted with more anger than Sid had seen on

her. "What is your fucking problem, Gwen? This is exactly why I'm breaking up with you!"

"You're—?"

"Yeah! Let that sink in," she snarled.

Gwen stepped back into her room, crying anew, covering her face. "You can't," she whimpered.

"Yes I can!" Hafsa followed her in. "You don't respect me, you don't respect Sid, you don't respect my family! Hell, you didn't even respect Nebula," she rattled off, stabbing a finger at her with each point. "You never bothered to learn the difference between Arab, Arabic, and Muslim, even though you've known me for over half a decade. I bet you don't even know the difference between Bangladeshi and Lebanese!"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Gwen sobbed.

"Everything!" Hafsa threw up her hands and stormed back out of the room, pushing past Sid, who was still standing, shocked, in the doorway.

Henry came flying up the stairs, eyes locked on Hafsa. "Don't you raise your voice at my sister," he shouted.

"Who the fuck is Kyle!" she screamed in his face.

He stopped dead.

Ava rushed up behind him, tears running down her cheeks. She put her hand on his shoulder and he flinched.

He growled, "I'm out. I need another beer."

Sid watched him go back downstairs for half a second before turning back to Gwen. His heart hurt seeing her sinking to the floor, clutching her head and weeping, but he… He'd done this too many times. He'd prioritized Gwen over Hafsa too many times. And if this is how she was going to repay him…?

She paused her crying, parting her curtain of tangled hair to look up at him plaintively.

He shook his head before she could say anything. "We're done. We're done." He shut the door quietly and turned back just in time to hear Ava's defeated explanation.

"She met him on Tinder seven months ago."

"Seven months…?" Sid whispered.

He couldn't process Hafsa's reaction. Too much was clicking into place. Gwen had been cheating on them both. Gwen had been cheating on them both while she was manipulating him into not spending the holidays with his family who he never got to see. Gwen had been cheating on them both while he slept in her bed with her, while he dreamed of his white kelpie.

Was… Wasn't that cheating, in itself?

A gasp escaped his lips as he was overcome with emotion. He flew past Hafsa and Ava, almost tripping on his way down the stairs. He barely even registered Henry leaning on the kitchen counter as he ran to the door.

"Sid?" Henry called. "You good?"

He couldn't answer. He couldn't even breathe. He fumbled with the door for a moment before flinging it open and stumbling outside into the humid air. Unsteadily sinking to the step, he heaved breaths in and out as everything ran through his head: Gwen's awful bigotry towards Hafsa and her family, her manipulation of them both, her cheating on them both while still acting like their time and feelings were disposable…

He knew he wasn't as bad as Gwen for loving that kelpie, but didn't he sneak off to be with him, only a few days ago? Didn't he lie to their faces about what he was doing? Wasn't that the same?

He didn't know. He kept going in circles in his mind, trying to justify his actions, trying to stop running from himself.

With shaking hands, he pulled out his phone and called

Genette. Everything spilled out; she hardly had to ask what was going on.

"Woah, woah, woah, slow down," Genette said. "Gwen cheated on you?"

"Yes," he sobbed, "but that isn't the point. The kelpie— I—"

"Wait, you seriously think you and Gwen are in the same boat here? You— Sid, I can't believe I have to say this, you didn't cheat on anybody with a kelpie."

"But I loved him, Genette," he choked out, not knowing if it was past or present tense.

"You visited him to put your feelings to rest, right?"

"Yes." His voice wavered.

"Tell me what happened."

He described how he went down into the lake to look for him, how he got caught in the weeds, how the kelpie saved his life again. How they spent the night together on the beach, watching the stars and hearing the waves, never speaking. How he'd laid his head against the kelpie's neck and felt safe, truly safe. How he'd felt their chapter close in the morning light. How he'd watched him retreat into the water without looking back.

After a few agonizing seconds, Genette sighed. "Listen, Sid, I don't think there's any handbook for what happened between you two. I don't fully understand it myself, but if anyone could, it's Hafsa. You have to tell her."

He breathed shakily for a moment, then said, voice weak, "Yeah. Yeah, I think you're right."

"Aren't I always?"

He managed a tiny laugh. "Most of the time."

"Good luck, Sid," she said warmly. "Don't be such a scaredy cat. Love you."

"Love you too."

He rubbed his hands roughly across his face, then pushed himself up onto his feet. As he opened the door, his feelings folded down inside of him. He knew he had to talk about it, but not right now. Right now, Hafsa needed him to help her deal with this, not make it worse by adding his thing on top.

Henry stopped him as he passed through the kitchen, wordlessly handing him a glass of water.

"Thanks," he said hoarsely. He fought to not shake too much as he held the glass, sipping carefully.

"Uh," Henry coughed awkwardly, leaning hard against the counter on both hands, "Ava and Hafsa are still upstairs. If you want to talk to them."

"Thanks," he repeated.

Before he could walk away, Henry went on. "But, uh, I think they're still talking, so you can stay here as long as you want."

Repeating himself for a third time, he nodded and stiffly kept sipping his water. He could tell that Henry was trying his best to make him feel comfortable. He wished that he could accept it, but he was just too stressed to do anything but stare. He knew what was coming. It was proving very difficult for him to put down his own anxiety, and prepare himself to be present for Hafsa. He was getting worked up thinking about how he would be basically lying to her now if he didn't tell her this was bothering him, but if he said anything he'd be making it all about him, and wasn't that exactly what Gwen did all the time?

Hafsa came down to see him standing perfectly still, knuckles white as he clutched his glass. Her face softened immediately and she hurried over to him, arms out, pulling him into a hug. He shuddered and struggled to slide the glass onto the counter until he felt Henry take it from him. With a whimper, he sank

into Hafsa's hug. Before he closed his eyes, he saw Henry walking away down the hall.

"Are you okay?" Hafsa asked at a whisper.

He pulled away a little, enough to look at her. "Are you?"

Her brows lifted and she cupped his cheek. "You look like you have more on your mind than I do."

"I…" He couldn't choke out anything else. He knew she thought he was this distraught over Gwen's cheating, and it's not like he wasn't, but how could he allow himself to be hurt by that when he's surely hurting Hafsa too?

"I know, it's a lot. I'm really upset too. I'm here to help you, though, Sid." Hafsa stroked his hair. "We're on the same side. Let me help you."

"N-no, I can't," he stammered, turning his face away. Tears poured down his cheeks and words poured out of his mouth as he, almost incoherently, said she needs a real partner, and to be valued, and that he's just like Gwen.

Hafsa put her hands firmly on his upper arms and squeezed, her face walking the line between fiercely hard and calmingly soft. "Sid, slow down. What are you talking about?"

He couldn't form the words.

"Tell me what's going on, Sid," she urged.

"No," he whined, still unable to look at her, "you need—"

"I need you to explain yourself," she said, cutting him off and giving him a little shake. "You can't just say you're just like Gwen right after we learn she's been cheating on us."

He tried to speak, but all that came out was a squeak. He started sobbing and couldn't pull himself together enough to talk for several moments. The whole time that he couldn't talk, he could tell Hafsa was getting more and more agitated, and it was making it even worse for him, but how selfish was that?

Inside, he was twisted in circles as he drew gasping breathes until he could manage to splutter out all his spiraling thoughts.

As the story pieced together, Hafsa lost her anger and pulled Sid close again. She swayed him gently and when he was finished, she told him he's ridiculous, and that she'd known since camp that the kelpie meant something more to him than he could explain.

"Isn't that—"

"No, whatever you were going to say, no," she chided, resting her head on his shoulder. "Sid, if I had a problem with that, ever, I'd have told you… I even knew you'd been back to Shimmering Lake. I had a feeling that's what was going on when you said you needed time to yourself. Plus, Jolly caught your scent on the island." She drummed her fingers on his back. "I didn't say anything because I know it's hard for you, whatever's going on between you and that kelpie. I didn't want to make it harder." Digging her fingers into him now, she said with a ragged sigh, "No, baby, you're not… You're nothing like Gwen. That is not what this is."

"But—"

"But nothing. It's my call, isn't it? Whether or not I'm upset?"

He let out a shuddering breath. "Y-yeah."

"So let it go."

He nodded, cautiously wrapping his arms around her.

"Can we… Can we go back to your place? I don't want to be here anymore."

"Of course, baby. N-neither do I."

When they got back to Sid's house, Genette's motorcycle was out front. Sid instantly felt a bit calmer knowing that his sister would be there.

Before they could open the door, she was there with Drum-

stick cones in her hands, calling them inside. After handing the ice cream treats off to the two of them, she gave Sid a tight hug and whispered a promise to him that this hasn't changed anything between her and Ava.

Only a week later, they uncovered even worse news.

Hafsa and Sid were sitting in Genette and Ava's apartment on their couch. They were kind of watching YouTube on the TV, but both Sid and Hafsa were glued to their phones.

Sid was staring listlessly at the message history in the group chat the three of them had shared on Discord. They were all still in it, and Gwen hadn't blocked either of them, so he knew she'd seen what Hafsa had sent, but she hadn't replied. She hadn't even reacted to any of the messages. Reading them over again made him feel cold and far away.

liongirl: i should have dumped you years ago. no, we never should have dated in the first place! i didnt WANT to say yes! i didnt want a relationship with someone who's racist and transphobic and so terrified of conflict that she cant even show others basic respect!

liongirl: do you even understand how fucked up it was that you made me help you when nebula dumped you? they were right to leave you. you made me read those messages like they were being crazy but youre the crazy one and you always have been

liongirl: idefk how you could make me be polyamorous with you and then still cheat on us. like you have to be impressively stupid to do that

liongirl: you know i cant help but think you aren't even nonbinary, you just said that to try to get close to me and sid. things always have to be about you dont they? its not like you could suddenly not be white to have that in common with us,

so you have to pretend to be trans to make sure nobody forgets youre the center of attention

liongirl: i put up with so much shit from you from the moment we met. and i always wrote it off and let you get away with being so weird to me and sid all the time bc i wanted to fit in. i wanted someone who loves me and takes care of me. i wanted human friends. you shattered my trust and stomped on my heart, gwen. i hope you cant live with yourself.

He didn't know what he hoped she felt. He didn't want any of this to be happening.

He jumped out of his skin when Hafsa smacked his arm and said, "What the fuck, Sid, look at this."

She held her phone out for him to see, angled so Ava and Genette could see, too.

She was on Instagram, looking at a photo posted three hours ago by Gwen. She was on a stony beach somewhere, it looked like some kind of resort. She was wearing a little yellow bikini and had her arm around a shirtless guy's waist. That must be Kyle. He had his toned arm around her shoulders. She was smiling so bright, but her eyes looked… Sad? Guilty?

Anger flared in Sid's chest and he looked away.

"What the fuck," Genette hissed.

"Where is that?" Ava asked, peering at the photo. "That doesn't look like Canada… Oh, for fuck's sake, she went through with it."

"What do you mean?" Hafsa turned on her, eyes fiery.

Ava leaned back a touch. "Don't shoot the messenger, but… Apparently Kyle really did buy them tickets to Spain. And shelled out on the resort that she wanted to go to."

"You knew about this?!"

"No! I mean, kind of? But I didn't think she was actually

going to go…" Ava sighed and pinched her nosebridge. "She took off to Kyle's place a couple nights ago, but I thought it was because we all got in a huge fight over her planning this stupid vacation with him days after… After all that shit went down."

"That's so fucked up." Hafsa threw her phone down onto the table.

Sid wrapped his arms around her and she sank against him.

"I'm sorry, Hafsa," Ava said morosely as Genette rubbed her back. "I tried to tell her not to go. Alan and Aileen didn't want her going either… I mean, we hardly know this guy because she's been keeping him a secret from us for seven fucking months too. Nobody is impressed with her right now."

Sid looked gaunt and exhausted as he said, "I guess I didn't expect her to sit around and mope forever, but… A bit more than a week of grieving the relationship would've been nice."

"I don't want to see her happy ever again," Hafsa snapped. "She's only doing this to rub this shit in our faces!"

"Why are you still following her?" Ava asked.

"I'm not! Ripley liked it, that's why it came up on my feed."

Genette said, reaching for her phone, "May I?"

Hafsa tossed it to her a bit more roughly than intended.

Genette clicked on Gwen's profile and blocked her. "Easy, now she's as good as dead to you." She looked at her brother. "You should do the same, Sid. Trust me, it's better this way."

With one hand, he lifted his phone, where he still had their old conversations open. His finger hovered over the block button, but he didn't know if he could do it. Not yet, anyway. He may not want to talk to her at all right now, or hear from her or about her, but…

But what? Was there a future where he could let her back into his heart, knowing the pain she's put Hafsa through?

His shoulders slumped and he let his finger fall. The phone slid onto the couch, and the screen timed out.

Hafsa whispered hoarsely, "Thank you."

Sid pulled her closer, squeezing his eyes shut. "We're done with her, baby. We won't be treated like that again."

New Beginnings

The slow rhythm of cars driving by felt like a lullaby for Morgan, Laurie, and Cherry as they lay in bed together, all piled into the middle to cuddle. The glow in the dark stars shone softly above them, and the quiet hum of an essential oil diffuser created a backdrop for their sleepy breathing.

It had been another long day in their weird month and a half. Weeks ago, they'd gone to the doctor and confirmed it: Cherry was pregnant. They took their time to process what they were told, spending long hours talking about all the possible futures that lay before them. Together, equally, they decided to go through with this. Even though they were all scared, they were also all full of hope.

Starting a family was, admittedly, something that had been on all of their minds— Laurie's parents were even paying for Morgan's sperm to be kept frozen for a few years, just in case, so she could go on hormones without worrying about no longer being able to have biological children. But this wasn't a plan for now, not so soon, not while they're still so young and building their life together. Sometimes, though, life has other plans, and they all felt that their miracle baby deserved a chance. Besides, the more they talked about it, the more real it felt, and the more real it felt, the more they realized that they were more ready

for this than they gave themselves credit for.

Today, they'd told their families the news. It had been… Difficult, exhilarating, enlightening… Everything across the board.

Mommy and Pa had been overjoyed, but for totally different reasons. Pa was fully supportive, even though he was a little shocked, and he promised to be there for them every step of the way. He was already thinking of ways to help them cut costs on getting anything they needed for the pregnancy and the baby. Mommy, though, launched into a spiel about how this was going to make Morgan consider having a normal family, so she didn't raise her child with all these ideas in their head. All that did, though, was make her consider going no contact with her.

Trace, on the other hand, was nervous. He couldn't imagine having a kid himself, when he'd be their age in a few years. He was scared they were making the wrong decision. Morgan had to reassure him several times that they all wanted this, but it was grating on her too, hearing his constant fears that they were throwing their lives away.

Laurie's family, who had been doing slightly better in terms of respecting them over the past couple years, surprised them by offering to collaborate with their other families and get them a proper place to live. There were talks about helping them buy a house in the Glebe, using the money they'd set aside to keep Morgan's sperm frozen, since they weren't gonna need that anymore.

Cherry's family was absolutely head over heels for the prospect of their new baby. They were practically competing to provide baby clothes, furniture, toys, and anything else they might need. They did, however, stress the importance

of Cherry keeping her good head on her shoulders, and not sacrificing her career. They were willing to do anything to help her with that.

Losing her job was never on the table, anyway. Cherry was, of course, already planning to keep working. She'd stay at the restaurant as long as was healthy, moving from the kitchen to more administrative work once she was too far along, and she'd go back to work as soon as possible after the baby was born.

Morgan had started working with Ronnie at Happy Goat and she was liking it, but she had her eyes set on a high paying security guard job that she had the credentials for. She didn't want to be working nights forever, but they'd need the extra money.

Her girlfriends had reassured her that because they both had steady, secure jobs, it didn't matter if she jumped from job to job. It was working for her, it made her happy, and it gave her purpose, so why should she stop? Besides, how wonderful would it be that their child could say one of their moms had done so many different cool things?

They had confided in Suzanne, Ripley, and Jason about the thing that had been on all of their minds, and learned that no, this baby would not be a werewolf. Morgan was bitten, so the only way she could pass on her lycanthropy would be to bite someone in turn. This was a big relief, but Morgan got worried many years in advance about what their child would say about her being a werewolf… How would they explain it? When would they tell them? It sure would be a weird call home if the kid said anything about it at school. Would they ask to be bitten, to be turned into a werewolf too? What would she say?

But they didn't need to borrow stress from the future. They'd tackle all of that when and if it happened.

Their immediate worry was getting married: who would marry whom, if they did marry at all? They knew they all wanted to have a commitment ceremony, but the legal side of things… Ugh, it was a headache. And, if Laurie's parents were serious about helping them buy a house, moving, too, was something to stress about.

None of that stress could touch them that night, though, not while they were cuddled together in their big bed oasis, Morgan and Laurie's hands intertwined over Cherry's belly.

"My loves?" Morgan murmured, lifting her head out of the crook of Cherry's neck.

"Yes, baby?" Cherry said sleepily.

"Are we gonna be good parents?"

"Yeah, I think we will," she said, smiling.

"I think so, too," Laurie whispered. "It's a lot, and it's terrifying, but it's also… So, so beautiful. We're getting a chance to give our little miracle the childhood we want for our own inner children, that we wanted for ourselves but never got. It's going to be amazing, I promise."

"But—"

"Shhhh." Laurie reached over Cherry with her other arm to smash her hand into Morgan's mouth. They all giggled, curling closer together.

They'd made a few crazy decisions over the past several years: jumping into a triad, moving out as teenagers, Cherry managing a restaurant, Morgan telling so many people that she's a werewolf, Laurie standing up to her family. This was just another crazy decision, but it's been working so far, so why wouldn't this?

Even with that hope and love in her heart, fears and worries still swirled around Morgan's head as she tried to sleep. She had

never trusted herself to raise a child, not with the upbringing she'd been given. She knew Laurie, too, was scared of not doing a good enough job as a parent for her children. But together, with Cherry, they had each other. They had Arty, DeeDee, Trace— even Laurie's siblings were starting to come around and be better to her. Well, her sisters, anyway; Kyle had run off last month to Spain with his girlfriend, who he'd been weirdly secretive about. But that didn't matter right now, it was not their problem to solve. At least Brody had always been awesome.

That wasn't everyone they had in their corner, either. Journee, Parker, Ram, Keshaun, and Adi, and all their friends from camp would go to bat for them. Even Morgan's friends from the shapeshifter support group would be there for them, surely. They weren't going to be doing this alone. They'd never be alone in any of their crazy decisions. That's what kept their hearts light enough to think that maybe, just maybe, this wasn't so crazy after all.

* * *

Sitting in bed with Barclay fast asleep at his side, Ronnie typed and deleted the same message to Ram and Morgan, over and over again. It was not the first time he'd tried to do this, not even the first time this month, but maybe this time he'd really do it.

Maybe if he could just turn his brain off for two seconds, he'd finally…

Ronnie: so how did you figure it out

His thumb had slipped. The text was sent.

He sucked in a sharp breath. His eyes bugged out as he stared

into the sharp, incriminating glow of the phone screen.

But maybe this was a blessing in disguise. Whatever now, right? The text was already sent, he might as well send it to Morgan too. With trembling fingers, he copied the text and sent it a second time before promptly shoving his phone under his pillow and burying his face in his hands.

A few minutes passed and he slowly clawed his phone back out. He knew they weren't gonna respond now. They were both asleep, it was the the middle of the night. He opened Instagram instead and, since he was already being a bold idiot, added a trans flag to his bio. He began to shake all over and deleted the app.

Hiding his phone again, he tried to get some sleep, but couldn't stop the panicked thoughts.

What was the point of any of this? Nothing was gonna change. He didn't want a new name. He didn't care if people kept using he/him or started using she/her or whatever. He didn't really need to change how he looked any more than he already had… He'd been playing around with femininity for ages now, wearing women's clothing and makeup. He was terrified of hormones and even moreso of surgery. Plus, he's a vampire, how is that even going to work?

Did he want to live as a woman full time? Did he want to live as a woman at all? What did it mean to be a woman, more than what he was already doing? If Laurie could be a woman and wear men's clothing, if Ram could be a woman and not change her name, if Morgan could be a woman and not always be on estrogen…

He tossed and turned. What did any of it matter? He wasn't them. He was himself. He'd always be himself.

It was two in the morning. He knew he shouldn't trust these

thoughts… Any of them.

He found his phone again and redownloaded Instagram. His blood ran cold when he saw that Journee had messaged him.

mysticalmagical: :eyes: :transgender_flag: ??

His hands shook so hard he could barely use his phone as he hastily edited his bio again, so that the trans flag was now beside Barclay's name and their anniversary with a heart.

sonicthevampire: oh

sonicthevampire: haha i put it in the wrong place

sonicthevampire: its beside barclays name now

sonicthevampire: bc hes trans lol

Seconds ticked by and anxiety built in his chest as he watched her read the messages and not say anything.

sonicthevampire: not that theres anything funny abt being trans

sonicthevampire: omgggg just forget i said anything

Panicking, he closed Instagram again and tried desperately to find a way to unsend the texts to Morgan and Ram, but all he could do is delete them on his end.

They'd still see it. They'd see it when they woke up. Then they'd ask him what he meant.

Maybe they wouldn't get it. It's not like he said the word trans or transition or even coming out. But at the same time, he hasn't exactly been subtle. He remembered talking to Ram about trans stuff at their housewarming party not even two months ago. Everyone knew he liked wearing dresses and lipstick. A trans girl could put two and two together.

Sitting up in bed, he tried to not cry, but he couldn't hold it in anymore. He pressed one hand over his mouth, the other curled around his middle, trying to stay quiet. He would hate it if he woke Barclay up with this stupidity, too.

Of course, that's what happened. He felt him roll over and sit up, draping an arm over Ronnie's shaking shoulders and squeezing him tight.

"What's up?" he mumbled sleepily into his back. Then, a little louder and clearer, "Are you crying?"

He tried to deny it, but all that came out was a garbled mess.

Barclay pulled himself up and wrapped both arms around his body, one over his shoulder and one around his waist, hands interlocking on his chest. He nuzzled his neck softly and asked, "What's wrong? Did you have a nightmare?"

"N-no," he said, voice wavering, "it's nothing. Go back to sleep."

Barclay cracked his eyes open and saw Ronnie's phone on the bed. He saw the texting app open to his chat with Morgan. He saw his last message.

How did she figure it out…? Figure what out? Barclay's groggy thoughts slowly cleared as he pieced it together: this text to Morgan specifically, the way he'd been wearing more and more feminine clothes, the way he'd been trying all sorts of makeup styles, the way he'd talked about Ram's transition at their party in May… This late night crying. Barclay remembered his own late night agonies before he came out, wondering if and what and when.

Of course. Of course.

"Oh, Ronnie," he breathed, hugging him tighter. "It's okay, my love. I'm going to be by your side through this, I promise. I will always love you, no matter what happens. There's nothing that can change that."

"But what if I'm stuck like this forever?" He sobbed, wanting to pull himself away from Barclay. He didn't feel like he deserved his love right now.

"Stuck like what?"

"Confused. Lost," he mumbled. "I don't know what I want. I don't know who I am."

"That's okay," Barclay whispered. "You don't need to have it all figured out. It took me a long time, too, to understand who I wanted to be. It isn't easy, but that doesn't change what I said. I'll always be on your side, my love."

"I don't think I deserve that." The words tumbled out with his sobs without him really noticing.

Barclay sucked in a surprised breath. "What? Why would you think that?"

"I don't know… I… I need help. I don't know how to do this. I'm… I don't think I want to… Transition. But I don't want to… To be a man… Anymore." Another sob escaped. "I feel broken, Barclay."

"You're not broken, baby. I promise." He squeezed harder, wanting to dig inside of his chest and rip these horrible feelings out. "Let's take it step by step. Does it feel good to wear makeup and women's clothes, like you have been? Does that help?"

"Y-yeah."

"You're allowed to keep doing that, then. Keep doing whatever makes you comfortable. You don't need to do anything that feels wrong." He shifted so he was looking down at Ronnie. "You've slowly been incorporating more and more into your outfits. You're already taking baby steps to expand your comfort zone. The first step was the dress at the dance, right?"

He nervously bit his lip and nodded.

"I had a feeling, back then. I'm glad you had the courage to do that, and that you've been able to keep doing it." He closed his eyes and pressed a soft kiss against his shoulder. "I'm so proud of you, my love. I always will be. I promise it's gonna be okay."

Ronnie was starting to relax a bit, though he still felt like his insides had been replaced with hot vinegar. He tilted his head to rest it on Barclay's as his boyfriend settled back down into bed. "Thank you for always supporting me," he murmured. "It's been… It's been good to wear whatever and not feel weird about it."

"Mhm, you don't need to thank me, my love. You'll always be safe to express yourself however you want with me. Is there anything else that would help you feel more like yourself?"

"I… I don't know. I don't want surgeries. I don't think I want hormones… I don't know."

"Is there another name you want to use? Or different pronouns?"

"I… I don't think so. I like my name. Do I… Do I have to change that?"

Barclay shook his head, bumping Ronnie's off. He apologized quickly and pulled him back close. "There are no rules to being trans. You can pick and choose whatever parts of transition that you want. Anything that makes you comfortable, makes you happy… Makes you feel like you. And you don't have to stick to anything forever just because you chose it once. If you decide you do want HRT or surgery or to change your name, that's always okay." He squeezed him harder. "And if anyone gives you any trouble at all, for anything, I will always have your back."

He fought an involuntary shiver. "I don't want to make this harder for you than it already is…"

Barclay chortled. "Is it hard for me? I don't remember saying it's hard for me." He planted a playful peck on his cheek. "Was it hard for you when I came out?"

"No."

"Why would you coming out be hard for me?"

"I'm just… I…" He groaned, rubbing his face roughly.

Barclay touched his hands with gentle fingers. "Hey, it's okay."

"It's hard not to feel like a burden."

"I know what you mean," Barclay said with a sigh. "Coming out can feel like you're making your problems everyone else's."

Ronnie nodded, wiping away tears that began to fall again. "I feel like I'm being selfish. Like I should keep hiding what I want, but I don't… I don't think I can. Ugh. I… I put a trans flag emoji in my bio on Instagram for like five minutes and Journee saw. I told her I put it in the wrong spot by accident, that it was for you." He drew a shaky breath. "I… I can't tell what's worse, coming out and telling everyone I'm… Whatever I am, or lying to myself forever and doing nothing about what I feel."

"Hmm. Well… There's no reason you have to tell anyone, if you're not ready… I guess aside from maybe Morgan, since you texted her."

"And Ram. I sent her the same thing."

"Right. It doesn't need to be anyone else's business. Even them, you can say it was about something else, or to just forget it."

"N-no, I… I want their advice."

Barclay nodded. "If you don't tell anyone else, that doesn't have to be the same as going back into the closet. It just isn't anyone's business but yours. Like I said, there's no rules to being trans."

He let out another big, shuddering breath. "I suppose you're right."

"So… What changes do you want to make, to start with?"

He was silent for a long time before eventually finding the voice to say, "Could you show me how to do makeup tomorrow?

L-like, properly."

"Yeah, we can do that." He kissed his cheek again. "Let's get some sleep now, okay?"

"Y-yeah. That sounds good." He let himself be pulled back into bed and tucked under the covers. He let out a long, relieved sigh, tears welling up in his tired eyes. "I love you, Barclay."

"I love you too, Ronnie," Barclay whispered back, cuddling him close so his head was on his chest. He hoped that his heartbeat in his ear would calm him down, and he was pleased when he began to relax bit by bit. "Everything's gonna be okay. I promise."

* * *

It hadn't even been a month since Sid and Hafsa had found out that Gwen was cheating on them, and their lives were going through more drastic changes. Hafsa was starting her new job at the Ottawa Citizen, and Sid's Aunt Serena had broken her leg in a bad fall. The family needed him to go back up north to help run the business. Hafsa needed to stay in Ottawa to lay the foundation for her future.

They sat in Sid's room as he packed. The air was heavy between them. They had a lot to talk about.

"I'll just come out and say it," Sid said with a huff. "I think I want to stay in Nunavut with my family for a long time."

Looking up at him from where she was curled on his bed, Hafsa asked, "How long?"

"At least a couple years." He couldn't look at her as he smoothed a shirt down to be tucked into his suitcase. "I know that's a long time."

"And that's all you're bringing?" she teased, pointing to his

suitcase and backpack with her foot.

He managed a tense little laugh. "Uncle John will be mailing more of my stuff once I'm settled. I didn't want my things getting lost on the flight in."

"That makes sense."

"So, um," Sid huffed again, "what will you be doing while I'm gone?"

"Well," she drew the word out, tucking her leg back under her, "I've gotta keep this job for at least a year for it to be, like, worth it. You know, for my resume and my program. But I'm thinking of traveling."

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"Anywhere. I can drive to most places through Silent Woods." Her eyes lit up. "I can visit you in Nunavut! I can drive there!"

Sid was still fussing with his suitcase. He still wasn't looking at her as he said, "Yeah, that'd be nice."

"You don't sound very happy about it."

"Sorry," he sighed, kicking his suitcase closed and dropping down to sit heavily on the bed. "I'm just distracted."

"What's up?"

"Well, for one, my aunt has a broken leg," he all but snapped.

She winced; they both apologized at the same time. She reached out to touch his knee. "I think this is harder for me than I thought it would be."

He looked over at her, slow and sad and warm. "I'm going to miss you a lot."

"So I'll come visit," she said, almost pleading.

"I don't know. It's pretty chaotic up there, and there's not really anywhere for you to sleep… Plus, it'll be a lot more complicated with my aunt being injured. And I don't know how we'll explain to them that you drove all the way up there

from Ottawa. That isn't really, like, possible."

"I mean, we could tell them how I'm doing it. Your cousins already know."

He gave her a look.

"I know, I know." She sighed and slumped her shoulders, looking away, towards his bedroom door. "Do you not want me to visit you?"

"It's not that."

"Then what is it? It feels like you're trying to get rid of me."

Sid's heart and tongue were twin stones. He needed to say something, but he didn't know how to begin.

"Talk to me, Sid." There was something close to desperation in her voice.

The words jumped out of his mouth: "Are you even polyamorous?"

"I— what?"

"Because I am. I am definitely polyamorous."

It was Hafsa's turn to speak without thinking. "How do you even know that? You never dated anyone else."

"I—"

"And no, the kelpie doesn't count."

He leaned back, scowling. That wasn't even what he was going to say, but she hit a nerve. "Why not?" He finally looked her in the eyes. "Does he only not count because you don't want me to have cheated on you too?"

"What is your obsession with cheating on me!"

"Can you keep your voice down?" he hissed. "My family is home."

"What, you're ashamed now? You sure wanted to talk about it a lot when I found out Gwen was cheating on me!"

"Us, Hafsa. She was cheating on us."

"And you were cheating on us too, obviously, because that's what you want to believe," she growled, standing up and crossing to his door. She stopped without opening it or touching the doorknob.

Fighting to keep his voice steady, he said, "It sounds like you're the one who wants to believe that, but for the record, it never even crossed my mind that I could have been cheating by seeing him until I thought about what Gwen did."

"How is that?"

"Nothing happened between us. Nothing at all. Just like I said at Gwen's house."

"But you— you—"

"I what? I visited an old friend and we slept beside each other on the beach? That's cheating to you?"

"It's the principle!"

"Then why did you tell me everything was fine?"

"I don't know," she said, covering her face. "I don't know."

For a few long moments, they were both quiet, breathing almost in sync.

"Do you want to start again?" Sid said softly after some time, hoping this wouldn't be the fight to end their relationship.

They'd had fights before, small fights over nothing and big fights over even more nothing. They always pulled through, though. They took a minute and restarted and pulled through. This was their first fight over something as real as this. He didn't know if they could survive it. Could relationships survive things like this? He'd never really had a relationship before Hafsa and Gwen.

"Yeah," Hafsa finally said with a breathy exhale, "yeah, maybe let's start again."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

He waited. He didn't really feel like he had to apologize.

"I… I think I'm just not… Handling it well. Being cheated on." She glanced at him. "By Gwen. I… I know you didn't… Do that."

"I'm glad you don't think of it that way," Sid said softly, dragging his eyes to the floor. "I would never hurt you like that. If I'd thought this is what would have come from me visiting him, I would have told you what was going on from the start."

"It's not your fault," she said, resting her forehead against the wall near his door.

A hotheaded reply flared up in his throat, but he bit it back.

"I didn't lie, back at her house. I knew the whole time. I didn't think it was cheating or— or anything bad at all. I'm just… I… You know when I get angry I say things I don't mean."

"Is that why you told…" He coughed awkwardly, hoping she hadn't heard him, but she was looking at him again. She definitely heard. There was no going back now. "Is that why you told Gwen you don't think she's nonbinary?"

He watched the storm unfold on her face. "What? You— you know that's… She's transphobic, Sid. She… You know what she said about you! She doesn't think you count as a man!" She threw up her hands. "Why would a real trans person say that?"

Is that what Gwen thinks? Because that's not how he remembered it. Yeah, it hurt his feelings to hear that she didn't think she was into guys, but she called him her exception. She didn't say he didn't count… Even if that's kind of what she meant, he supposed.

"And she was always saying weird things about Nebula," Hafsa went on, "and you cannot have forgotten how weird she was

about my parents! Have you never wondered why I never take her to visit my family?"

He felt like a coward for how hard it was for him to look at her today, but that's where he was at. "You're right, but you should never have said that to her."

"But she—"

"No, I know you have your point," he said, raising his voice just enough to be over hers.

"Do you?" she challenged. "Do you actually understand why I think she's faking?"

He dropped his head into his hands. "Please, Hafsa, I'm not trying to fight with you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She took a deep breath, hugging her arms and slumping hard against the wall. "I don't want to fight you either. I just feel like you're not listening to what I'm really saying."

"I feel like you don't understand how what you said about Gwen is hurting me."

She paused, her face unreadable as she watched him.

He took this as a sign to explain himself, so he said, "Neither of us are transitioning medically. She didn't change anything about her presentation, but that doesn't make her any less nonbinary."

Hafsa opened her mouth and started to say something, but lifted a hand slightly and shook her head. "Go on, sorry, I'll wait."

"N-no, that's kinda it. It just felt… Invalidating to me, I guess."

"Well, that isn't what I meant," she said. Eyes trained on the floor, she looked small and exhausted. It was breaking Sid's heart and he knew it was his fault. "It has never been about her presentation or her transition or whatever. It's the fact that she doesn't respect any of the trans people in her life, and that

she… Ugh. Back at camp, when she came out, it felt like she just wanted so badly to fit in with us and Ripley, and she just couldn't relate to us because to her, we were so different that she could never feel on our level. We all had a connection to Silent Woods and she didn't. Don't you remember her saying that?"

"I do…"

"It's not a stretch to assume she felt left out because the three of us are trans and not white, and she's cis and white. It— it just felt so convenient! Like, here's this really easy, low commitment label I can just slap on myself and forget it, then they'll all like me even though I have no fucking social awareness and I'm mean to Hafsa all the time!" Her voice cracked as she started to cry. "I hated that relationship so much, Sid. I have been an outsider all my life— everyone, all the time in this world treats me like a freak— but I have never been more othered by anyone else. She was the worst one, Sid." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "I felt like I could never leave because— because anytime I tried to confront her she would double down, or cry, or act like I'm the one being unreasonable, and it just felt— it was like she was gaslighting us into thinking she couldn't do anything wrong."

"And her being nonbinary, her coming out like that, it felt like just another way to shift the blame," Sid said, half asking, half putting it together himself. "Because if she's nonbinary, then how can she be transphobic to you, to us… Even if she's always saying inappropriate things about our genders and bodies?"

She nodded, a sob escaping her lips as she tried to respond.

Sid opened his arms to her and she fell into his hug, sitting beside him and crying into his shoulder.

"Yes, Sid, exactly," she eventually was able to get out. "This is

what I've been living with this entire time. Do you not think that's fucked up?" She pulled away to look him in the face. "Would you have ever said all those things she said? What about Ripley? What about Morgan?"

"No, Hafsa… Of course not." He patted her back, staring at a point on his wall, struggling to not feel far away.

Hafsa was right, and it was a lot for him to process. He'd gone so long trying so hard to not think of Gwen's little comments as anything but another one of her quirks, but… But Hafsa was right. Even if he could never feel okay saying Gwen isn't nonbinary, it did feel… It did feel like a way to get away with continuing to hurt them, a way to not have to take criticism or face the consequences for her actions.

"I'm sorry," Hafsa's defeated mewl broke his thoughts. "It was cruel of me. I don't want to be cruel."

"It's okay," he whispered. "It's okay. I… I don't want it to be true, I don't want her to have faked being nonbinary like that, but I don't think it matters if she did or not. Because she… She still hurt you. She still hurt us both, and Nebula, too. I… I clearly got a better side of her than you did. She was… I mean, yeah, it hurt my feelings when she said she doesn't like men, and obviously I remember what happened at camp, but I thought she was better than that now. I thought things were better." His shoulders slumped. "What she did was wrong. I should have cared about that more, protected you more."

"I didn't even know it was wrong for ages," she cried. "No, I knew it was wrong but I— I was scared! I thought she was right. I thought I was being crazy. Even after I talked to Morgan about it, it took me years to stand up to her, a-and then I couldn't even do it how I wanted to because she was— she—" she was cut off by a sob.

Sid held her a little tighter, softly saying, "You talked to Morgan about it before me?"

"I'm sorry. She j— Gwen just really really loved you, I thought if I said anything, I'd…" She sniffled, reaching for the box of tissues on Sid's bedside table. "She always loved you more than me. I wanted to be happy for you… I wanted you to be happy. I didn't wanna mess up what you two had."

"I would have rathered things be messed up but you be safe and happy," Sid said, but he couldn't be wholly confident that he would have had the courage to change things, if something had been said back then. It was true that he'd been a pushover in their relationship, too. The coldness this brought him solidified something he was almost too scared to verbalize.

Relief washed over him when Hafsa said, "So where does that leave us?"

But, still cowardly, he said, "What do you mean?"

"… I love you, Sid."

"I love you too, Hafsa."

"I… I don't know… if…"

"If it's gonna work out."

"It's not your fault," she blurted. "I don't hate you. I don't blame you."

"No, no, me neither. I have nothing to blame you for that wouldn't be hypocritical and fucked up to do to you." He drew a deep breath. He nearly sobbed as he said, "But I think we both need a— a change."

"I think I need to go to therapy," Hafsa said with a bright, painful laugh.

"I think I need to be alone." Well, not alone. "Single. I need to be single."

"Y-yeah."

He rested his head against hers, still on his shoulder.

"F-fuck, Sid, I didn't think we'd be b-breaking up too. I wouldn't have come."

He laughed, but it felt like his heart was breaking in two. He didn't want this. He wanted to cram all those words back into his body and keep pushing through. But that wasn't possible. And even if it was, what good would it do? They were right. They were both right, and they both knew it.

They talked for hours, determined to figure this out. They agreed that it was for the best. They both agreed. For now, they'd just be friends. They needed room to grow as people without having a partner— Gwen, each other, or anyone else— weighing in on the process. They needed to see what and who they could be on their own, and heal from these past five years of being tangled up in Gwen.

Maybe in a while— a few months, a few years— they'd see if they could make it work again as partners, but deep inside, neither of them was sure they'd need to make that change again. They still had each other, in one way or another, and that's all they could really ask for.

* * *

Genette tapped on Ava's door as quietly as possible, balancing both their bowls of rice and chutney by holding them against her belly with one arm. In her other hand was the litre bottle of Pepsi they were going to share.

"Uh, just a sec Gwen," Genette heard Ava say.

There was a crackly reply, but Genette couldn't parse it. She listened to Ava's chair roll back on the vinyl floor and creak as she stood up. Two thumping steps and she opened the door,

her face gray and sour.

Genette, half whispering, asked, "Not going well in there?"

"Nope," Ava sighed. She carefully took one of the bowls and the Pepsi from Genette. "Thanks for dinner, babe."

Genette pushed aside a cold prickle. Now was not the time. "Anytime."

Ava slid back to her chair on socked feet, unceremoniously dropping her bowl down onto her small desk.

It was a very small room, with just Ava's desk, bed, and nightstand. Sometimes Genette felt like she'd hardly moved in at all, and was just biding her time before she could take off on another indefinite road trip. With everything going on in her head these days, she didn't know if that would be a good or bad thing.

"Why is Genette here?" Gwen's voice came through Ava's laptop speakers.

Ava scowled at the screen. "Because she lives with me?"

"Don't you two not even share a room—"

"Can you just let me have my girlfriend here so I can handle this?" she snapped.

Genette cleared her throat and said, "Gwen, you're hardly in the position to be passing judgment right now."

Gwen rolled her eyes, but Henry, who had been silently listening to their conversation with his camera off, grunted his agreement.

Genette sat on the edge of Ava's bed, picking at her rice as the three siblings jumped back into their back and forth about how nobody was happy with Gwen right now. Everyone in their family was upset with her for cheating on Hafsa and Sid, who they loved like family, and for running off with her secret boyfriend despite their parents telling her she isn't allowed.

"Well, you got to walk off your job and run away, Ava," Gwen shot back, crossing her arms and looking away.

The conversation devolved into bickering that Genette had to tune out. She studied what she could see of the room behind Gwen. It was dark, illuminated by only the light from a small lamp built into the headboard of the bed she was sitting on. The bed was huge, with fluffy white pillows. The wall behind her was white, and there was a green closet, maybe, in the background. Clothes were strewn all over the bed and the bit of floor she could see.

When she tuned back in to what they were saying, she caught the tail end of Ava heartfully telling Gwen that they miss her and are just worried about her, and that they'd always love her because she's their little sibling.

Genette sighed imperceptibly through her nose. She pulled out her phone and texted Ava something she didn't want the others to hear.

Genette: yknow im kinda struggling here bc gwen was genuinely abusive and racist to my little brother and hafsa and it feels like youre not really getting that

Ava glanced over her shoulder at her, eyes flashing.

Ava: i do get it

Ava: why would you say that?

Genette started typing, but Ava sucked in a sharp breath and said, "Sorry, I've got to go," and slammed her laptop shut.

The two of them stared at each other for a few long, tense moments before Genette said, "You're not acting like you're getting it."

"What, because I haven't completely cut Gwen off? You do realize she's my little sibling, right? She's been there for me way longer than you or anybody else has."

Genette recoiled, but Ava was rushing through an apology before she could speak.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that isn't what I meant t—"

"I know," Genette cut her off, maybe a little too coldly. "You didn't mean it like that. I know."

Ava's face slowly turned red. "Genette… I can't abandon her, Genette. You have to understand that. She's my baby sibling and she's making a huge mistake— she's been making really huge, really bad mistakes. She needs help. I know she's always been like this, always running away from her problems and never actually doing the work to improve," she gritted her teeth, "but that doesn't mean I can just… Get rid of her."

Genette took a few moments to get her words together. "It's hard for me to watch, Ava. Sid hadn't really told me how bad it was for a long time. It's still fresh."

Ava stared at the floor, leaning over with her head in her hands. "I know."

"This is Henry all over again," she went on, "but Henry actually did improve. I've already admitted that I was wrong about him. I'm not wrong about Gwen. Gwen's doubling down and running off to fucking Ibiza."

Ava's phone started buzzing like crazy, so she excused herself to check her messages. Genette tried to cool down while watching her read them, but her anxiety ramped back up as Ava summarized what was going on in the siblings' group chat: Gwen was losing her mind at the two of them, telling them they'd never understand her like her boyfriend does, and that they and their parents don't know what's good for her.

She slammed her phone down on her desk so hard, Genette was sure the screen cracked. Her head slumped back down into her palms. Genette watched, too frozen by her emotions to act,

as she cried quietly for a few minutes.

Eventually, in a small and broken voice, Ava admitted, "You're right, Genette. I hate this. My life is falling apart. I don't know why things can't just be normal and happy for us."

"Things weren't normal and happy for Sid," Genette pointed out, trying her hardest to not sound cold. "It hurts that you think keeping things the same, despite him and Hafsa suffering, is better. It's like you don't want to face difficult truths and make necessary changes."

Ava let out a sudden sob, clasping her hands over her mouth. She tucked her legs up onto the chair and swiveled it away so she wasn't facing her anymore. She pressed her forehead against her knees and sobbed.

Genette's heart twisted, but she couldn't bring herself to do anything but watch her cry. Her emotional distance was doubled as Ava began to beg her not to leave, which was not what was happening at all and not even what she said. It was so striking that all she could do was sit there, staring, feeling like she was hovering slightly outside of her body.

Ava looked up at her, her hair plastered to her face from her tears and spit and snot.

Genette managed to whisper hoarsely, "I don't think this was a good idea, us trying to be together again."

"No!" Ava sobbed, covering her face again.

The words kept spilling out as she watched Ava, expecting her to totally freak out, but she just stayed curled up in her chair, slowly crying softer and softer. "I think we both have more growing to do. Our relationship wasn't… It isn't… As healthy as it should be. I think we're both really clinging to that sense of… Normalcy and happiness… That we gave each other when we first met."

More long quiet moments passed before Ava was able to look up at Genette and nod, saying, "You're right. I'm sorry."

Genette whispered, "I'm sorry too."

"I love you," Ava closed her eyes, "but that isn't enough to fix everything, is it?"

"Sometimes it isn't."

"I thought we could do anything together… Face anything." She was quiet for a few moments, the silence heavy with things that never got a chance to be said, never got a chance to be done. "I thought I could with Henry and Gwen, too."

"I know what you mean. I thought we could, too."

"We've all been through so much together," Ava's voice cracked a little, "but it's just made us worse."

"That's not really true," Genette said. "It's not like our trauma made us bad people."

"No, but I— I'm— I…" She groaned, flopping her head down. "I want so much from you, Genette, more than you could ever give."

Genette almost said she's noticed.

"I don't wanna sound like you're not good for me, you're really, incredibly good for me," she went on, "but that's kind of the problem. Ugh, I don't know if that's even what I mean."

Genette broke out of her icy trance and placed her hand on Ava's shoulder. "It's okay. I understand you, Ava. I always do."

She slowly and cautiously hovered her hand over Genette's.

"Don't think for a second that I don't love you, Ava," Genette whispered, aching to take her hand.

She could see the tension fall away a modicum as she said, "I love you too. But we can't… We can't."

"Yeah. Yeah."

"… I can see if Aileen can pick me up tomorrow."

"Okay," Genette breathed, putting her hand back in her lap. She didn't think she needed time apart, but if Ava did, that made sense.

Ava's face was white as a sheet as she mumbled about packing and still using her address for a while so neither of them got in trouble for breaking the lease.

Genette stopped her, saying, "Breaking the lease? What? You want to move back home?"

"Well— I— I thought—"

"Wait, you think I want you to move out?" Genette snorted, adding with humor, "And leave me paying $2000 a month by myself?"

"You could find another roommate," Ava blurted. "You could easily find another girlfriend—"

"I don't want to," Genette said automatically, not quite knowing if that was true. At least not about the second part. "I don't want to do that to you. Kick you out, I mean. We can still live together."

"Are you sure?" she asked, surprised.

"We wouldn't be the first lesbians to do it." Genette gave a halfhearted smile. "Plus, it would be really awkward if we cut each other off and I still had to come to your garage to get my bike fixed."

They both laughed; Ava had started her job at the garage because Genette bought a motorcycle, mainly to help her make the thing safe to ride, since it was a bit of a fixer upper.

Ava wiped the last tears from her cheeks and tried to return her smile. "I'll have to stop giving you the girlfriend discount, though."

"What about the roommate discount?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment before saying, "Yeah, I

might be able to make that work."

They shared a laugh again, both feeling a bit lighter. Maybe this could work out after all.

* * *

Staring at her childhood home from the end of the long driveway, Abigail dried her eyes and gathered her strength. This was just another hard decision after months of hard decisions, she knew that. That wasn't about to make it any easier.

She had just finished the last arrangements to lock up her dear old mom and dad into a retirement home. Her dad's dementia had gotten to the point where he was unsafe to live unassisted, and none of her siblings wanted to take up the charge of living with him and Mom. Her mom, too, had broken her pelvis after a cow hadn't taken kindly to being milked, and had been wheelchair bound ever since, which was not conductive to farm living.

Stuck at home caring for her parents, Abigail hadn't been able to go back to volunteering as a counselor when the third round of Shimmering Lake Summer Camp returned last summer, or the fourth that ran last month. Once things were set in motion to send them to a care home, she had vowed to leave home and never come back, like she'd wanted to as a teenager. But looking at the old, run down house, its ivy-choked walls sighing for her, she felt a sadness she couldn't dismiss as simple nostalgia.

She brushed stray hairs from her face, turned off her car, and stepped out onto the shoulder of the road. She patted the roof of her old Ford truck; she didn't need one of those street legal monster trucks that were so popular these days, she had her old dependable. With hardly a click of her tongue, her dog,

Samwise, leaped out through the driver's side door, alert at her side.

"Alright bud, you think we can do this?"

He woofed and wagged his tail, looking up at her with his tongue lolling out.

Taking it all in, she wasn't as sure. The ivy would need to be cut back, at least, if not completely removed. Some of the brickwork was crumbling, the windows needed to be replaced, and the old pipes had gone south. Inside, too, they needed to remove the garbage that had piled up while she was struggling to keep things in check, and clear out the hoarder levels of junk that her parents refused to get rid of but couldn't take to the home. That wasn't even touching on the barn and the pastures… They'd had to rehome most of their livestock because part of the barn's hayloft had collapsed, and the chicken coop needed to be entirely rebuilt. The fences for the secondary pasture hadn't been maintained in a long time, so it wasn't safe to use, and the vegetable and fruit gardens between the house and the barn were full of weeds. The only things that weren't falling apart were the stone gargoyles along the path to the barn.

If she was going to do this, she couldn't do it alone. This was too much work for one person. She needed help.

She couldn't imagine Adi out here, digging in the dirt with those long nails they loved to wear. Marilda, though, if she wasn't busy, could be a real asset. Especially if she brought a dragon. And, of course, Jason would be the perfect man for the job. She guessed she'd have to ask them. She had a lot of courage to work up.

Truth is, she didn't feel that close to many people. She'd always struggled to make friends, and since camp, Adi was the only person she'd clicked with. Even from camp, she only really

considered Morgan and maybe Sid to be her friends, aside from Jason and Marilda. Sid was heading to Nunavut, though, and wouldn't Morgan have enough on her plate already, with the baby coming and having to move?

Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she hefted its small weight in her hand. The thought of bothering anyone about this insane undertaking made her stomach turn. It was her business and her business alone, just as it had always been.

But that was always how her dad had made her think, wasn't it? That she couldn't do it, that she was the failure of the family, the disappointment. He isn't standing here, berating her for not being strong enough, not being man enough to take over the family farm, to resurrect it for him.

It wasn't for him anymore, though. It never would be again. This wasn't his farm. It was… Hers.

She squared her shoulders and opened her phone. She texted Jason, explaining the situation and asking for help.

She walked up the driveway to check on the barn and the cows inside. Half the building was covered in tarps to keep the weather out, with extra support beams put in to temporarily help keep what's left of the hayloft from falling. Their two remaining cows— all that was left of their once plentiful livestock— lifted their heads from their feed to greet her as she pushed open the working door. Samwise slipped in after her, tail wagging as he trotted over to say his hellos.

Before she could get to work, she felt the buzz of Jason's reply.

Jason: Hey Abigail, great to hear from you! I'm sorry to hear about your parents. That sounds like a tough situation. I would be glad to lend a hand! I can come over as soon as tomorrow, if I can get Shebal to watch Red. We've already wrapped up our session of camp for the year, so my schedule has opened up. We

should come up with a game plan together where we can both see what we're working with. What's the earliest you'll be free?

Jason: Before I forget, you should ask Marilda and Morgan if they want to help out. Marilda's in the area again and she brought her mount. I'm sure she'd have no problem helping out. Morgan loves these kind of odd jobs too. I think the kids these days are calling them side quests :0)

She smiled to herself. She had missed that guy. More texts came in, pointing out that Laurie and Cherry could help with catering, and Genette, Ava, and Henry would be some great muscle. Ripley, too, would have a blast, if he wasn't too busy. Hafsa had her reporter job now, so hey, she might be able to make a story of it: Local Farm Brought Back From The Brink Through The Power Of Friendship.

She was picturing it now. It made her uncomfortable to think of all those people getting to see the awful truth of her childhood, and the harsh reality of her future. But maybe that's part of growing. Maybe she was selling herself short, convincing herself that none of them were really her friends, even when the truth was staring her in the face, lighting up her phone with offers to help.

Looking down at her oldest friend, she gave him a pat on the head and said, "Alright, bud, let's get this figured out."

* * *

Ripley adjusted the rearview mirror of his brand new— to him— bright red punch buggy for the millionth time. He had packed everything into suitcases and bags, stashed in the trunk and back seats: his clothes, his pin collection, a couple stuffed animals, a family photo album, his magic compass, and all the notes he's

ever made on creatures found near and far.

He'd packed almost his whole life into one little car. Of course, both his moms and dads let him keep his bedrooms intact at their houses, but… This was it. He was taking off. Not moving out, not traditionally, but he wouldn't be home very much at all for the foreseeable future.

He was going on another road trip— a long one, not just his little visit to Shimmering Lake like last summer. And he'd be on his own this time. His dads weren't coming.

He was excited, so, so excited, but he was also filled with… Fear? Anxiety? Was it just anticipation…? He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it buzzed inside his chest like an angry bee.

It wasn't like this was his first time traveling solo, though what he considered solo travel maybe didn't entirely count— when he and his dads were on their road trips, he'd wander off in whatever town they ended up in, or go find walking trails by himself. That's how he ended up involved with last year's round of camp at Shimmering Lake, which was a lot more intense than he had been ready for. He'd sort of traveled without his dads last month, too, when he had been called in as reinforcements for camp, but that didn't really count, either.

This was, admittedly, a lot different than all that, even with the weirdness of camp. Living alone— out of his car, no less— on the road, with only himself and his books for company, finally getting to fully embrace his lifelong journey to discover, catalogue, and protect all the magical creatures in the world…

His eyes and hands dropped from the rearview mirror to stare out the windshield and grip the steering wheel. He'd said his goodbyes fifteen minutes ago, why was he still sitting here?

"Let's get a move on, buddy," he whispered to himself.

He started the car, pressed his foot gently on the gas, and crept down the driveway. He took a look at the magic compass sitting on the passenger seat, but he couldn't bring himself to pick it up yet. He wasn't ready to leave… He wasn't ready to leave the Outside world.

He had some things to do first.

He drove to Place D'Orleans, to the place where he first met Laurie, Ronnie, Cherry, Barclay, and Morgan. The place he had waited to be picked up for camp, for his first real journey into Silent Woods. In a way, he owed it all to Place, but maybe he just wanted to hold onto whatever nostalgia he could before throwing himself into the unknown.

He parked his car near the entrance with the Rexall and walked up to the automatic sliding doors, taking a moment to look up at the huge glass awning above him. Inside, he passed the double escalators and wandered around the food court. He couldn't really work up an appetite, but he noticed there was a Claw World here now. He went there and won a yellow ducky keychain that reminded him of Ronnie, and how he hadn't been able to go to his housewarming party because he'd been in Silent Woods. He wondered how many other milestones he'd miss now.

Pushing the thoughts away, he decided to try to find the Sugar Mountain candy store. He always loved that place, with its funky decor and huge selection of neat treats.

The route he took brought him past the Kiddie Kobbler. He remembered going there— not this location, but the same store— to get shoes as a kid. He loved all the toys and fun decor they had, which made the process of buying new shoes a bit more bearable. Then he passed the Mountain Warehouse store, where he and his dads had bought camping equipment for this

very trip, and the funny looking Nessie kiddie ride that he used to be obsessed with as a kid. He still loved her, and sacrificed a twoonie to ride her one last time.

He picked up the pace once the ride was finished, all the memories chasing him.

He ended up back in the food court without having found the candy store, and he realized he'd taken the wrong route. Maybe a little bit on purpose. He went down the other wing of the mall, a twinge of anxiety saying he hoped it wasn't closed. He didn't want to have to go all the way out to Bayshore to go to Sugar Mountain, though he supposed that wouldn't matter anymore. He could probably find a real sugar mountain in Silent Woods.

He was relieved to finally find it where it had always been. He bought himself a small bag of gummy bears and sour keys, then went back outside before the nostalgia could take hold and make him stay there all day.

Sitting on the same curb where they'd been picked up for camp, Ripley could see that the mess of construction that had been there last time he was here had finally been replaced by the aboveground parts of the LRT station for the mall. He was washed over with a weird sadness. For the past, like, seven years, he'd been waiting for this extension to come to Orleans, and now he wasn't gonna be here for it to be built. He wouldn't get to ride Line 1 all the way past Blair to Place D'Orleans station. He laughed at himself for being sad over such a silly thing.

He had changed so much since getting to go to that amazing, crazy, scary, wild camp. He had finally proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Silent Woods, and all the magical things it contains, are real, and introduced his family to that breathtaking world, which set in motion this very road trip he was setting off on.

He had made amazing friendships, too, that have lasted all the years since. He didn't like to admit it, even in his own private thoughts, but he'd always struggled with making friends in school, to the point that he'd thought from time to time that he'd never get to have a close friend. That's one of the things that drove him to find magic in the world; maybe in those places where strange things were normal, he wouldn't be misunderstood anymore. Of course, it was this very interest that made so many of his peers think he was too weird to be cool. But it was also this interest that gifted him the best experiences of his life, and introduced him to the best people he'd ever met.

And now he was leaving them behind.

So many things were about to change.

Morgan, Laurie, and Cherry were about to have a child… He could hardly wait! He was so, so excited to be this baby's cool uncle. Imagine having a werewolf for a mom, and going to Silent Woods for summer vacation!

Gwen, Sid, and Hafsa broke up, and Gwen was in Spain with her new, but not really new, boyfriend. He could not understand even for a second how Gwen could cheat on such wonderful people, especially since they were polyamorous in the first place. Hafsa was starting her super cool job with the news, and Sid was off to Nunavut again. All Ripley could do was hope for the best for them. His heart broke for them every time he thought about what had gone down.

Abigail was getting help from everyone to breathe new life into her farm, which she'd inherited from her parents. It was a massive project! He'd been over to help repair the fences for the cow pasture. He couldn't wait to see what the place became over the next few years.

Ronnie and Barclay had their fancy new apartment! And

Genette and Ava were living together too, though he'd heard that they weren't dating anymore. And Henry, Henry had come so incredibly far from the angry, dysregulated boy he'd befriended at camp.

So many things were about to change, and he was leaving. But he wasn't leaving it all behind… It would be there, trailing after him as he discovered himself in the brand new world he was going to explore.

A smile spread across his face as he got to his feet, dusting off the seat of his pants. He put his empty bag from the gummy bears into a garbage bin and walked slowly back to his car, savouring his time in the parking lot.

"Maybe I'll see Shebal first," he murmured to himself, watching a couple with a young child as they made their way to the mall's doors, "and Gownik and Bryllig."

He got to his car, running a hand along the hood and roof before slipping inside. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, melancholy making it hard to get going already. But after visiting those three, he knew he could go to Jason's to get a taste of whatever famous home cooked meal he had whipped up today.

After that, the world's his oyster.

With a deep, steadying breath, he let go of his anxiety and put the keys into the ignition.

"Life's gonna be good," he whispered. "Life's gonna be good."

About the Author

Laika Wallace (she/he/it/sie) is a dog who died in space. No wait, that's just Laika. Laika Wallace is a disabled Indigenous horse wo/man whose many ghosts haunt the streets of "Canada" creating poetry, fantasy & sci fi novels, music, and mixed media artwork, exploring what it means to be alive in many forms.

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